



下

＋原案・監修＋森利道
（アイクシステムワークス）
＋著＋駒尾真子

BLAZ BLUE
BLOODEDGE EXPERIENCE
ブラッドエッジ エクスぺリエンス

ドラゴンブック



カバーイラスト / kyo
カバーデザイン / coil

Cover illustration: kyo
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"You... What the hell did you do to Raquel!?"

"To fuse... yes, we will become one. Now, guide me. Into the emptiness where everything swirls and mixes... To the Boundary!"



"I'll take the Hunter's Eye. Kill my brother."

Blazblue

Bloodedge Experience

Part 2

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Chapter 7: Siblings

Consciousness emerged from a dreamlike state. That moment was both an “awakening” and a “realization”. At the same time, it was a “memory” and an “enlightenment”... it could even be called a subtle “tremor”.

Yet in that moment, she still knew none of these words.

She was inside a small box. She did not yet know to call it a coffin. A place to lay the dead to rest, and a place to awaken her.

Held within it, she lay quietly, surrounded by a soft cushion and a dense aura of darkness. There, she simply floated in the darkness, her mind filled only with the awareness of her own existence.

Her senses trembled. What scratched at her consciousness was a sound. It was a voice. A deep, calm voice softly whispered, urging and inviting her. At first, she couldn't understand the meaning of the sound. But gradually, the sound became a voice, and the voice became words.

“Raquel.”

It felt like she was being called. So she opened her eyes. What she saw was a pair of crimson eyes looking down at her. The most beautiful, enchanting gaze, wet with emotion, was the first thing she beheld.

"Raquel. That's your name. It's a word that means you."

"It means... me?"

Her small lips traced the words spoken with soft intonations. Name. That short word granted her consciousness a vessel. Just that weight alone gave her existence a foundation. It was a kind of magic. A very short yet heavy spell that depicted what she was. And at the same time, it was a strong mark of binding. In that instant, she became “Raquel.”

The crimson eyes gazing at her narrowed slightly, a faint smile appearing. But it was not born of kindness or gentleness. Raquel did not know the words to express the emotions swirling in the deep colors... but it was a burning pity and a chilling resolve.

The first few months were filled with education. The owner of the crimson eyes taught Raquel many things. The countless names that spread across heaven and earth. Life and death. Reason and instinct. The world. Reason. A place that was deep and dark, and a place that was white and empty.

The owner of the crimson eyes called himself Raquel's father. He said Raquel was his daughter.

The education was long and perpetual, as if it were an endless dream.

The next few months were hellish. Once Raquel had gained enough self-awareness through her intensive studies, the owner of the crimson eyes took her deep into the underground chamber of their ancient castle. To open her perception.

The owner of the crimson eyes connected Raquel's mind to the "Boundary". The "Boundary" was a place that transcended both time and space. Within it, every moment, every event, and every possibility drifts. It was a connection to make Raquel aware of everything present there.

Raquel was bewildered. She understood that this act was very dangerous. Yet the owner of the crimson eyes provided her with information from the Boundary.

No, he threw Raquel's mind into the information of the Boundary.

In an instant, a flood of information crashed down upon Raquel's entire being. It engulfed her sensory organs and forced its way deep into her brain, which struggled to maintain its sense of self. Knowledge was etched into her mind one after another.

It was painful. It was terrifying.

Raquel cried out for help. To the figure with the crimson eyes who called himself her father. But there was no voice to respond to her screams.

Exposed and naked to the violence of information that threatened to shatter her mind, Raquel continued to writhe in agony, not knowing how to resist.

The end of hell was brought about by light. She didn't remember the moment it ended. She wasn't in a state to form memories. That must be why.

No matter how much calm she regained later, Raquel couldn't tell if this was a delusion painted by a hazy consciousness, or if it was an event she actually experienced in the confused Boundary.

It was dark. The threads of Raquel's ego were about to snap, and she was losing the strength to struggle. She was on the brink of losing everything. And then... she saw a light.

It was a small, distant light. Within it, Raquel spotted a figure. She didn't know who it was, but she didn't care; she just wanted help. The pain was unbearable.

Raquel reached out desperately. As if responding to her plea, the light came to Raquel's side. In the light was a man. But it wasn't the father she had called countless times in her suffering, the only name she knew.

White hair, red eyes.

A stranger. But somehow, he felt so familiar... as if she had met him long ago, or would meet him in the distant future... a tangled thread of déjà vu.

“.....”

Unconsciously, Raquel's lips attempted to call out someone's name. As if responding to the unspoken call, he reached out from the light. A large hand grasped Raquel's hand, holding it firmly yet gently. The man smiled, awkwardly and stiffly. His red eyes, narrowed in a distorted way, seemed to be looking at Raquel.

Raquel opened her mouth to call out again. But before she could, the man and the light disappeared. The hand she had been holding was gone without a trace... but a different image was reflected in Raquel's eyes.

It was a shimmering blue. A deep and fundamental essence of the radiant world. Raquel, her eyes wide open, could clearly feel it - the pulse of the Azure.

In that moment, Raquel was freed from all her suffering.

—

In the sudden turn of events, Naoto was left speechless.

It was a Sunday afternoon, a peaceful day with a clear sky and a gentle breeze. The laundry, which had been slightly overdue, was swaying pleasantly on the sunny balcony.

Interrupting this ordinary, and therefore all the more precious, peace, a young girl arrived.

The unexpected visitor paid no mind to the entranceway; she knelt on the cold tiles where multiple shoes were lined up, sitting with her back as straight as if a wire were running through it.

Her long black hair, neatly tied up high, was glossy and without a single kink. Her white skin made her intense red eyes stand out strikingly. Those eyes gazed up at Naoto. Her kimono, in soft pink and pale purple fabrics adorned with gold dust, swirled with fan patterns, giving her the air of a princess from a period drama. Without even applying lipstick, she smiled faintly with her red lips.

The girl's name was Saya Terumi. She was Naoto's biological sister.

"There's no need to be so surprised, brother. Or have you forgotten about your little sister?" Placing her very white hands together on her lap, Saya asked teasingly but fiercely.

"N-no, I..." Naoto managed to squeeze that out, then fell silent again. The tension was palpable.

A nasty, sweat-inducing sensation spread to his fingertips. His mind was in disarray, unable to find the right words or response. The surprise and confusion left him in a daze.

Just then, a small tug on his clothes caught his attention. It was Haruka, Haruka Hayami. She was Naoto's childhood friend and the daughter of the landlord who had graciously rented him his apartment at a low price.

"Naoto-kun, why don't you come in for now? I'll make some tea," she said soothingly. Naoto could only nod in response.

With a reassuring smile, Haruka's large brown eyes seemed to encourage him. Her soft hair, tied up simply with a hair clip, made her look even more gentle and warm. Giving his back a light pat, she headed toward the kitchen.

Naoto couldn't even afford to glance after her as he turned his face towards the entrance, furrowing his brow as he looked at Saya, who was still seated. He was reluctant. He wanted her to leave right away, but it felt too harsh to shout at her to go away. Besides, he didn't want Haruka to witness anything too harsh.

With a self-deprecating sigh, Naoto nodded toward the interior.

"Come in. I'll hear you out," he said in a low voice, which he usually only used when he was bored. Dragging his heavy feet, Naoto returned to the living room with its out-of-place, open window. The window, which had just been inviting a pleasant breeze into the room, was now tightly closed, and even the lace curtains had been drawn to block out the outside world.

With his back to the setting sun, Naoto sat cross-legged on the living room floor. On the opposite side of the light brown coffee table, Saya sat in a formal posture on a flat cushion, ignoring the sofa.

Saya had a well-defined face. Rather than being glamorous, her quiet beauty made her look much older than her thirteen years. However, her petite frame was slightly below average for her age, and each of her composed movements made Naoto feel as if he were facing a doll.

Many might call Saya beautiful and adorable. However, Naoto couldn't view his sister's demeanor with such fondness.

"Um, would you like some black tea?" Haruka asked from the kitchen counter, her voice full of concern. Naoto was about to say that anything was fine, but before he could, Saya turned and placed her own order.

"I don't really like black tea. Could I have green tea instead?"

"Yes, of course." To Haruka, Saya was still a child. With an affectionate smile, she opened a small tea canister.

As Haruka efficiently prepared the tea, something stirred at her feet. Naoto turned his gaze to that spot. From behind the counter, a girl with hair like golden ribbons peeked out. It wasn't just her hair. The owner of that hair, Raquel Alucard, was watching them with distrust in her golden eyes.

(What the hell is she doing?) Naoto couldn't help but mutter to himself. But at the same time, he quickly understood what was going on.

Raquel was a vampire with a life force beyond human comprehension, and she had an aversion to being around women. Despite her extraordinary nature, she was mentally weak when faced with them. Suddenly, an unfamiliar girl had appeared, and she was clearly on familiar terms with Naoto and Haruka. Being left out of the situation without any explanation, there was no way she could maintain her usual aloof attitude.

"Here you go," Haruka said, crossing Naoto's line of sight as she brought over a small tray with two teacups. Saya sat up straight and bowed at a perfect forty-five-degree angle.

"Thank you. I'll enjoy this." She picked up the hot teacup placed in front of her and took a sip. "It's delicious, Haruka-san."

"I'm glad. Feel free to ask for more anytime." It was as if it were just a casual visit from a relative and the warm welcome of a family member. That was indeed how it appeared. But Naoto couldn't shake the feeling of unease, and his mind was filled with anxiety and caution. The more Saya talked and smiled, the more a sense of crisis and caution pricked at Naoto's insides. Because Saya...

"Saya... how did you get out?" Naoto asked, his voice stern as he intertwined his fingers. Saya, who had been sipping her hot tea, looked up and slowly placed the teacup down, her lips curving into a slight smile.

"How did I get out? You make it sound as if I were being held captive."

"It's not 'as if'..." It was exactly as the words implied. But Naoto bit back his words just in time. Haruka was right there.

It took effort. Naoto couldn't just blurt everything out.

Saya met Naoto's accusing gaze head-on, tilting her head slightly.

"Why are you so angry, brother? It's been so long since we've seen each other, and you're so cold."

"Y-Yeah, Nao-kun, you don't have to look so scary..." Haruka, surprised by Naoto's demeanor, spoke soothingly, but he didn't look at her. He pretended not to hear her words. He couldn't afford to be so relaxed in this unexpected situation.

"Saya, just tell me what you want."

"Oh dear, what a hasty brother you are." With a mocking tone as if ashamed of her inept brother, Saya smoothed her pale purple kimono and took out a white envelope. She placed it quietly on the table. Naoto's eyes widened in surprise. There was no stamp or address on the envelope, but there was a seal in the center as if to substitute for everything else.

It read "Amanohokosaka."

"It's a letter from Lady Mei herself." Saya placed her hands neatly on her knees again and slightly smiled, her red lips curving. At the mention of the name, Naoto instinctively looked up and stared intently at Saya, confusion filling his eyes.

The name Saya had just mentioned belonged to the current head of an old family called Amanohokosaka. Naoto had met Mei, the head of the family, a few times. However, they weren't close enough to exchange personal letters. So why would the current head go out of her way to send a letter to Naoto through Saya?

Naoto's brow furrowed deeper.

"Haruka, I'm sorry, but could you leave us alone for a moment?" Suddenly, Saya turned her head and spoke in a tone that allowed no refusal. Haruka, taken aback by the unexpected request, widened her eyes in surprise.

"I'm fine, but... is Nao-kun okay?" She turned to Naoto. Naoto nodded reluctantly, making a sour face.

"I'll be fine. I'll keep an eye on Raquel."

"Okay, I'll leave it to you. If anything happens, call me and I'll come right away."

With a nod, Haruka returned to the kitchen with the tray. On her way back, she pulled Raquel, who was still hiding behind the counter, to her feet and led her out of Naoto's house. As they left

the living room, Raquel turned back to glance at Naoto once, her golden eyes filled with displeasure. Their gazes met, but she quickly looked away, pushed by Haruka.

As he watched them leave, Naoto felt a bitter taste in the back of his throat.

(This is getting complicated... damn it.)

Naoto never expected Saya to find out about Raquel. In fact, he hadn't thought he would see Saya again at all—at least not outside the Amanohokosaka residence. When he was alone with Saya, the atmosphere felt heavy, as if it had thickened around them. Saya probably didn't feel that way. She might not even realize that she was the cause of this heaviness.

To shake off the unpleasant feeling of resistance, Naoto grabbed the envelope roughly. His fingertips tensed slightly at the solemn and imposing seal. A direct letter from the Amanohokosaka family. It was incredibly difficult to open. Even so, when he unfolded the thin paper, he found elegant, finely penned handwriting.

The letter itself was short. That's why Naoto gasped at its contents immediately.

"What does Lady Mei say? I heard that Lady Mei's magic is on this letter, so apparently no one but you can read the contents," Saya asked curiously, though it was unclear if she was genuinely interested.

Naoto folded the letter back up, slightly irritated by her response. "You don't know what it says?"

"Not really. But, considering it's Lady Mei, I can guess a bit," she replied, a hint of a smile playing on her lips as she sipped from her teacup.

Naoto glanced at the folded letter. It was true that Mei Amanohokosaka wouldn't tell Saya the contents, even if she knew Saya would guess. And she probably wouldn't have entrusted the letter to anyone other than Saya.

This letter wasn't a pleasant one.

"By the way, brother," Saya's voice pulled Naoto out of his thoughts, as he contemplated crushing the paper in his hand. "Who was that unfamiliar person from earlier? The ridiculous woman peeking out from behind the shadows?"

She must be referring to Raquel. Calling her ridiculous was unexpected. Naoto couldn't help but smirk at the thought. He wondered what Raquel would have said if she'd heard that. He was grateful to Haruka for taking her away.

"It's none of your business. Besides, is that all you have to say?" Naoto had no intention of telling Saya about Raquel. Or rather, he didn't want to involve her. He tapped the edge of the

table with the folded letter, urging her to speed up her words. "So why don't you just go home? I don't have any more..."

"Oh, please," With a cool and composed face, Saya smiled for the first time, a full-blown smile. It was as if she found Naoto's words utterly ridiculous. "I'm sure you know why I came to your home, brother. I came to... collect something."

A red tongue flicked out from behind her smiling red lips. Naoto let out a deep, long sigh.

Saya was right. He had known all along why she was here. It wasn't just to deliver a letter. The letter was an afterthought. Mei had simply sent the letter along because she knew Saya would definitely come to Naoto.

So what was Saya's purpose? It hadn't changed since the beginning.

"Brother," she said cheerfully—no, gleefully—and then her form blurred. At the same time, there was a loud bang as she struck the table. The blur was a lunge.

By the time Naoto's eyes found Saya again, she was right in front of him. He tried to pull back, but for Saya, whose arm shot out with lightning speed, Naoto's reflexes felt like they were moving in slow motion.

"Gah..." A crushed sound escaped Naoto's throat before he even realized it. At that moment, his feet were no longer on the floor. Something white had caught his neck. It was Saya's hand. Her arm, surprisingly pale for a human, lifted Naoto's body effortlessly despite its slenderness.

From behind her black bangs, Saya's red eyes smiled sharply. "'The Hunter's Eye'... I'll take your eyes, brother. I'll kill you." Her red eyes burned with murderous intent.

—

She didn't like it.

Still unsure of the situation, Raquel was urged by Haruka and brought to the Hayami residence a few floors up, clutching a cushion and visibly sulking.

The reason was simple. That girl in the kimono who had appeared so suddenly.

"Haruka..." Raquel called out to Haruka, who was preparing tea in the kitchen, from the two-seater sofa. "Who was that girl?" Her tone was sharp, clearly revealing her dissatisfaction.

To be honest, being alone with Haruka, with no one else around, was quite a burden for Raquel. However, the weight of her discontent was even greater than that burden. ...Although she couldn't bring herself to look up at Haruka.

"Hmm..." Haruka hummed softly, searching for words as she placed tea leaves into the teapot. She closed the tea tin with a gentle clink against the edge of the counter. "That girl's name is Saya Terumi, and she's Nao-kun's younger sister. Due to certain circumstances, she's living at the main family house, the 'Amanohokosaka' family, instead of her own home. I had heard that she wouldn't come out of there... but for some reason, she came to Naoto's house today."

Having said that, Haruka turned her back to Raquel and took out two mugs. The water for the tea wasn't quite boiling yet. Listening to the sound of the water approaching a boil, Haruka gazed at the electric kettle on the counter and tugged at her light-colored bangs.

"Nao-kun's family is quite old, you see. There are several branch families... and the Amanohokosaka is a very large family that oversees those branch families." Being a relative of Naoto's, Haruka wasn't completely unrelated to the Amanohokosaka family either. However, since Haruka was born much further from the old family than Naoto, she had never formed any particularly deep-rooted relationships with them. After Naoto's mother died, they had become quite distant. They didn't even exchange New Year's cards.

"Saya Terumi... Amanohokosaka..." Raquel murmured as if confirming, tightening her grip on the cushion in her lap. There was one puzzling thing. "...Her last name is different. Naoto called himself 'Kurogane'."

"Oh, that's because of Nao-kun's mother's situation." Haruka didn't know the exact details of why Naoto used the name Kurogane. However, she did know that Naoto had a very complicated relationship with his family. That was why Haruka couldn't bring herself to ask further. She understood that the past was a painful and difficult topic for Naoto.

With a wry smile, she shrugged her shoulders and poured the boiling water into the cups and pot. "I can't explain more than that. I don't really know the details..."

If Raquel wanted to know more, she would have to ask Naoto directly. However, the slightly furrowed brows of Haruka hinted that she hoped Raquel wouldn't pry too deeply.

"By the way, yesterday my mom brought back some baumkuchen. Let's eat it together!" Trying to change the subject, Haruka spoke in her usual cheerful voice and turned to the shelf in the back of the kitchen. The back of Haruka's head, tied up in a hair clip, disappeared under the counter.

That's when it happened.

"Ugh..." A sharp, intense pain gripped Raquel's chest, causing a dull ache. She instinctively stifled a groan, pressing down hard on her chest beneath the cushion. Raquel instantly realized what this pain was.

(My life... is being drained...)

It wasn't her life, but Naoto's. For some reason, the life force that Raquel shared and constantly supplied to him was rapidly diminishing.

She didn't understand why. But she quickly thought of the most straightforward way to confirm it, exhaling the breath that had caught in her throat, and threw the cushion she had been holding onto the sofa.

"Raquel-chan, how much do you want to eat... oh, huh?"

As Haruka set a white box containing baumkuchen on the counter, she looked puzzled when she noticed that there was no one in the living room where the sofa set was placed.

—

It didn't take long for a thick fog to envelop Naoto's consciousness.

"Ugh..."

Groaning softly, he struggled to free himself from the small hands that held him. His toes kicked at the air in vain.

But Saya's grip didn't loosen. With the stability of someone dangling a puppet, she easily continued to constrict Naoto.

"Ugh, ugh... let... go..."

"Brother, I've been wanting to meet you. But it won't do, will it? You've become so careless. To let me touch you... You haven't changed in that regard. I'm relieved. Or perhaps you wanted me to kill you?"

"No way... .. you know... that's not..." With discerning eyes, Naoto read Saya and retorted in a barely audible voice. As he spoke, he clawed wildly at Saya's hands and wrists. But his fingers lacked strength.

Saya's fingers, digging into his throat, were like the claws of a beast that had captured its prey. Naoto's body trembled as he felt something being sucked away from him, as if her fingertips were about to tear through his skin and flesh.

It wasn't his breath that was being taken. It was something more fundamental. Life itself. And this was no mere figure of speech. Saya's hands were intentionally draining Naoto's life force. As if to prove it, Naoto's eyes saw it.

The "Hunter's Eye," as Saya called it, allowed Naoto to visually perceive people's life force as numerical values. In his vision, the number representing Saya's life force, which floated above her head, was gradually increasing.

"Ha... .. ha..." A hoarse rasp escaped Naoto's throat. His head felt dizzy, and the sensation in his limbs faded. Gazing up at her brother's face, distorted by his agony, Saya wore a sharp smile.

"Naoto Kurogane,' huh? Ha, it's laughable that you would call yourself Kurogane, brother. Are you trying to carry your mother's gravestone on your back?"

"Sh-shut up... .. it's none of your... business."

"Oh, or do you think you have the right to claim it? As proof of causing our mother's death... I can understand that." Saya's tone was more playful than mocking, and Naoto's expression twisted into something other than anguish. If he could, he would have screamed at her in anger. Unfortunately, he couldn't seem to get his voice out.

"Sa-ya-aaa... !" Naoto's outburst was met with a short laugh from Saya as she pulled her brother's neck closer. Unable to resist, his legs swayed as if being dragged, his toes scraping against the floor. Naoto awkwardly supported himself in an unsteady manner. Saya's hand, which had been gripping his neck, moved up to Naoto's cheek, tracing his temple and then gripping his skull.



With both hands, she clamped down on his head, parted his stiff, tea-colored hair, and forcibly pulled Naoto's face towards her. They were almost within kissing distance.

Naoto gasped, grabbed Saya's wrists, and pulled with all his might. No matter how hard he tried, her hands wouldn't budge. Grasping her slender shoulders with all his strength, he tried to pull her away, but Saya didn't even lose her balance. Instead, she ran her fingers through his hair, stroking it, and pulled her captured brother even closer.

"Stop...!"

Saya's nose grazed Naoto's as she leaned in. One of them let out a breathless sigh, lost in the narrow space between their lips. Saya opened her lips slightly. The girl's red lips sought out her brother's, as if to devour them. More than just a touch with her palm, she wanted to consume more of her brother's life force.

But just before their lips met, Saya suddenly halted.

"What... is this? You're not... my brother?"

"Wha—" He tried to ask what she meant, but his voice was cut off. Suddenly, a gust of wind erupted from beneath his feet.

Now it was Saya's turn to gasp.

The gust of wind exploded between Saya and Naoto, mercilessly knocking them both back. Saya slammed against a low shelf beside the television, while Naoto crashed into the dining table, both hitting their backs hard.

"Ugh..." Groaning from the dull impact, Naoto clung to the edge of the table to stand up. From his feet, a shadow suddenly sprang forth with the same force as the previous wind. A beautiful girl with golden hair wearing a white blouse and a black mini skirt—Raquel.

"Raquel!?" Naoto shouted in surprise, and Raquel glanced back at him over her shoulder. But her gaze was quickly pulled back to the front.

The air stirred. Saya, quickly rising to her feet, kicked off the floor and lunged straight at Raquel.

Unnoticed, her hand had already found the hilt of her sheathed sword, and she assumed a deer-like stance. As she made her purchase, she closed the distance. With a lightning-fast motion, she drew the sword, its hiss barely audible. The blade, swift as a streak of light, sliced through the air and struck Raquel.

"Dodge!" Naoto's warning was too late. By the time his voice reached her, Saya had already swung her sword. However, Raquel was no puppet that could move without command. She raised a gust of wind to deflect Saya's blade, then dodged, avoiding the cold edge.

A red droplet flew through the air.

It was Raquel's blood. A single red line ran down her white, porcelain-like cheek, even whiter than Saya's.

Naoto could see it. The grazing tip had sliced a gentle arc, and a thin stream of red flowed from it.

"How rude," Raquel muttered with disdain as she took a step back. In that brief moment, the wound on her cheek seemed to absorb the surrounding whiteness and heal instantly. Seeing this, Saya paused for a moment, barely a breath. She jumped lightly and sheathed her sword with the grace of a dancer.

"The wound... it disappeared," she muttered to herself, her eyes narrowing sharply. She exhaled even sharper than her gaze and charged again. She slid her foot across the floor, lowered her body, and flashed her sword in a move to sweep her opponent's legs.

Once again, Raquel was the target. The unerring strike was deflected by Raquel's protective magic just before it could sever her knee. The sound of hard metal clashing echoed. Next, she jumped up from her crouched position and struck again. From a position higher than Raquel's shoulder, she swung the sword she had just sheathed down like a whip.

"Ugh..." Raquel groaned. This time, instead of defensive magic, she directly deflected the silver blade by blowing wind against it. As if to return the favor for narrowly avoiding a dangerous attack, Raquel kicked out sharply, her long hair and short skirt flying. The kick, with a force that rivaled a slash, plunged into Saya's open side.

Saya gasped softly. But she wasn't a girl who would meekly kneel. She swung the scabbard in her left hand, creating a sufficient distance between herself and Raquel. Immediately regaining her posture, Saya sheathed her sword again and assumed an iaido stance, lowering her waist.

"It's you. The foreign object that has entered my brother," she said, her hand already positioned to draw her sword immediately. She glared at Raquel, discarding her previous lightness and coolness and adopting a hostile intent.

But Raquel didn't try to retort. Instead, she took a step back, scraping her foot against the floor. Another step. And another. Finally, she retreated with the swiftness of a small animal and hid behind Naoto, her shoulders hunched.

"W-wait a minute...?" Naoto looked at Raquel in surprise. He thought she must have been injured badly enough to retreat. But when he saw Raquel's wide-open golden eyes completely lose focus and go rigid, he slumped his shoulders.

(Seriously... even at a time like this, she's socially awkward.)

For a moment, he forgot the tension that had been in the air. Naoto reflected on the impact of what had just happened. He turned to Saya, who was caressing her side and standing warily. His eyebrows furrowed slightly at the sight of his sister.

Saya's stance was not one of restraint or attack; it was a posture meant to kill, to end a life. That was the essence of Saya as a girl.

Naoto felt a wave of disgust. Swallowing his breath as if to suppress the unpleasant emotions, he resigned himself to several things. Ideally, he wouldn't want Saya to know about their situation. But that was no longer possible.

Saya must have already sensed it. Or perhaps, tasted it.

Saya had "touched" Naoto with her own hands. She had devoured the life force within him. She had absorbed the life of Raquel, which constantly replenished and made the mutated Naoto immortal, through her hands.

"Saya, I died once," Naoto said, and Saya's eyes widened in surprise.

"Died? Brother?" Her voice was that of a girl her age, making Naoto feel slightly embarrassed. He wished she would stop making such unexpectedly childlike faces. Irritated, Naoto nodded several times.

"Yeah... I got caught up in something dangerous recently. So..."

"That woman... is it because of her?" Saya's voice became cold and sharp, like the tip of a blade.

Naoto grimaced and shook his head immediately. "No."

Saya was looking at Raquel. To block her gaze, Naoto took a half-step to the right.

"Raquel saved my life back then. But as a trade-off, it seems I ended up sharing my life with her." He didn't know how to explain this situation to Saya, where he was essentially living on borrowed time from Raquel. It had become so normal that it sounded absurd when put into words. But how else could he say it?

(I'd better not tell her that Raquel is a vampire. That would just complicate things further.)

Deciding against revealing any details beyond the main point, Naoto withheld that information.

For a few seconds, Saya remained silent. After a moment, she spoke.

"So, you're borrowing the lives of others..." Her voice sounded as if it had been dragged up from the depths of her belly. It was unsettling, filled with something dark and foreboding. A shadow from her long hair fell over a crimson organ, staring into the void as if glaring at someone who wasn't there.

"The life I drained from my brother was completely different because of that... So, there is someone who killed my brother. My... my brother." Saya murmured, though she didn't voice it aloud.

Naoto clenched his fist tightly behind his back, trying to suppress the emotions welling up inside him.

(Calm down. This is... Haruka's apartment...)

Like a woman, Naoto reminded himself. This wasn't the time to let unnecessary emotions run wild. This wasn't the place for that.

"As long as Raquel is alive, I won't die. I'm borrowing my life from Raquel, and I have no intention of dying. I won't give you the 'Hunter's Eye'."

With a strong sense of determination, Naoto looked at the 'Hunter's Eye', which showed a series of mysterious symbols floating above Saya's head. If these were read as numbers, they would be '7946'.

Despite having absorbed a considerable amount of life force from Naoto, the number above Saya's head was quite low. Saya had always been like this. Her body was weak, and she often caught colds, causing her life force to drop drastically, making Naoto worry that she might die.

Everything was different now, compared to those days. Saya had changed, and so had he.

"Go home, Saya." Naoto said this firmly, almost as if pushing her away. A bitter feeling settled in his stomach. These weren't words he was happy to say.

Saya sneered. The flickering anger she had shown earlier disappeared in an instant. "What a cold statement, brother."

(Cold? You think so?)

Saya's hand went back to the hilt of her sword. As if to warn him, Raquel suddenly grabbed Naoto's clothes tightly. Peeking out from behind him, Raquel said to Saya, "If you draw that

sword, I won't hesitate to attack you, no matter what state you're in. ...Wouldn't it be better for you if you stopped now?"

Though her words came from a position of safety, they carried a weight that was more than sufficient for a warning, reeking of her knowledge of the circumstances.

Saya looked at Raquel with accusing eyes. Raquel immediately retreated behind Naoto, not meeting Saya's gaze. In a battle of intimidation, it was clear that Raquel was losing.

But Saya smiled again and slowly released her grip on the hilt, undoing her stance.

"Indeed, I've been playing a bit too much. I came here today simply to greet you and deliver a letter from Lady Mei."

"Liar..." Naoto unconsciously muttered at Saya's sudden change of attitude. The feeling of her fingers on his neck was too full of killing intent for it to be just a game. Hearing Naoto's small voice, Saya nodded politely and respectfully, just as she had when she arrived.

"Brother. I'll come back another day."

It was hard to believe that this was the same person who had just tried to gouge someone's eyes out. Naoto was utterly disgusted.

Naoto grimaced and put his hand to his head as if to ease a headache.

"Don't ever come back."

"That's not going to happen." As if implying that there was some fault on his part, Saya sheathed her sharp weapon back into the scabbard that had fallen to the floor. After securely tying it with a thin cord, she turned to Naoto with a heavy gaze. "My mission is to restore the Terumi family. To that end, I must have your 'eye'. I will definitely make it mine."

It was essentially a declaration that she would definitely kill him.

With a pure-looking smile, she directed a creeping murderous intent towards him. A chill ran down Naoto's spine.

(This is what it is...)

"Then, I will take my leave for today." With her ominous eyes covered by her eyelids, she performed a formal bow, holding the scabbard carefully to her chest as she quietly exited.

Only the front door watched Saya leave, and when the living room was left with only Naoto and Raquel, they both let out deep, weary sighs. Raquel's hand gradually released its grip on

Naoto's clothing. Once freed, Naoto languidly ran his fingers through his hair, messing it up before collapsing onto the sofa.

Saya had been there for only a few dozen minutes, but it felt like hours had passed. He was mentally exhausted. As Naoto slumped down, he noticed a pair of white toes in his line of sight.

Raquel, who had been near the entrance to the living room, had somehow come to stand right beside him without a sound or presence, as one would expect from a vampire. He thought of it as a joke.

"Ah... sorry about that. I put you through a lot," Naoto said, still hunched over without raising his body, directing his words toward the white toes in the corner of his vision. Once again, he had been saved by Raquel. If he hadn't been able to break free from Saya's grip, he would have died two or three times over.

"She's your sister, isn't she?"

"Yeah. Haruka told you?" While responding to Raquel's somewhat displeased voice, Naoto unconsciously rubbed the back of his neck. He could still feel the sensation of a small hand that didn't seem capable of holding a grown man.

"What happened? No... what do you mean?"

"What I mean is, I almost got killed by her..."

"That's not what I'm asking!" Raquel's tone was sharp, prompting Naoto to reluctantly look up. Her voice was uncharacteristically emotional—like she was anxious or confused, as if she were trying to sort through her tangled thoughts. In Naoto's lifted gaze, Raquel appeared even more serious than her voice suggested, her arms tightly crossed as if hugging herself.

"That girl... the power your sister used. It's a 'Drive.'" Raquel glaring at Naoto as if demanding confirmation. Naoto instinctively looked away, placing a hand on his forehead to bear the weight of her words.

"I guess so," Naoto said, his words accompanied by a heavy sigh.

When Raquel had previously told him about a power called Drive, he had briefly wondered if Saya had it too. But he had thought it was irrelevant to the current situation and had tried to push the thought to the back of his mind.

And yet, here was his sister, showing up out of the blue at a time like this.

"And it's not just any drive. It's the 'worst' kind of drive," Raquel continued, her tone increasingly serious, adding to Naoto's dread about his sister's bad timing.

"What do you mean by 'worst'?" he asked, furrowing his brow in confusion. It was not a word he could ignore.

Raquel looked at Naoto with an unusually stern gaze. The small silver mark between her brows gave her an urgent impression that didn't quite suit Raquel, who was usually arrogant and overbearing. With her chin tilted up, Raquel nodded as if to affirm.

"Yes. It's a Drive that absorbs life - a 'Soul Eater'." Raquel's words, light in color but heavy in meaning, cast a dark shadow over Naoto's heart.

A Soul Eater.

Naoto placed his palm against his neck again, this time over the mark left by Saya's hand.

As the name implied, Saya had the power to absorb the life force of anything she touched, especially when she touched it with her lips. It was as if she were devouring them.

"Wha—" Naoto's voice involuntarily escaped him, and he was about to ask something. But suddenly, the front door swung open, cutting him off.

Both Naoto and Raquel reacted instinctively. Naoto jumped up and rushed into the hallway, bracing himself as if ready to take on an ambush.

Naoto glared ahead, ready to face whatever might come. Behind him, Raquel crouched low, ready to leap over Naoto at any moment and launch a surprise attack. But that preparation was soon unnecessary.

In the short, straight corridor, at the half-open door leading to the entrance, was not the kimono-clad girl with a katana that Naoto and Raquel had simultaneously imagined, but Haruka, whose eyes were wide with surprise.

"Wh-what? Why are you making such a scary face...?" The door closed with a small sound. Naoto slumped his shoulders and looked back at Raquel, lowering his eyebrows.

(You startled me.)

"Oh, it's just Haruka..."

"What do you mean, just? Oh, Raquel-chan! You're here. That's a relief. I was so worried about where you went that I went looking for you at the convenience store," Haruka's face shifted from a pout of discontent to a bright smile as she spotted Raquel behind Naoto, relief washing over her.

Naoto glanced at Raquel and saw her take a half-step back, shrinking and looking down.

"Ah... um, I-I'm sorry... Just don't say anything..." Raquel stammered awkwardly, barely managing to get the words out.

(Is she starting to get used to Haruka...?)

Compared to when she couldn't even speak and was frozen in place, this was progress. Naoto smiled wryly as he watched Haruka walk past him and Raquel, who stiffened up when spoken to so closely. Even though she was getting used to it, it would still be a long time before Raquel could interact with Haruka normally.

"Hey, has Saya already gone home?" Looking around the living room and seeing that no one was at the table where the tea had been, Haruka said in a disappointed voice.

"Yeah. She said she had something to do."

There was no way Naoto could say she had been chased away after attempting to attack him.

As he replied casually and returned to the living room, he gulped down the remaining tea in his cup, which he hadn't touched yet. He let out a sigh of relief.

In this moment, the world felt normal again. With Haruka's arrival, Naoto's surroundings suddenly regained their everyday light.

"Ah, I'm so tired, I'm starving..."

Forgetting about Saya, vampires, and the 'Hunter's Eye', he wanted to do something completely ordinary. Naoto lowered his eyebrows slightly in an exaggerated manner, and Haruka's expression brightened.

"Oh, we have baumkuchen. Want some?"

"Yeah, sure. Let's go, Raquel." Naoto patted Raquel on the shoulder, encouraging her, and she took a step forward. Haruka grabbed Naoto's hand and urged him to walk.

"O-oh, u-uh, okay, okay." With that, Raquel, who had become as timid as a small animal, had no choice but to follow. After all, it was Haruka, and Raquel was already well aware of her personality. She wouldn't do anything bad.

As Raquel reluctantly put on her shoes, looking somewhat displeased, and Haruka watched over her, Naoto began to walk behind the two girls. He discreetly shoved the letter from Mei, which had fallen by the table, into his pocket.

That single piece of paper felt heavy. He didn't need to reread its contents. It had already been firmly imprinted in his mind. It wasn't even that long.

Written in a hurried handwriting, the contents were almost purely business.

"We can no longer keep Saya here. You must kill her yourself. P.S Don't you dare die on me!"

Chapter 8: Speculation

It was a beautiful day.

The sky was a soft, pale blue, with thin, stretched-out white clouds arranged like a knitted pattern.

It was a perfectly clear, refreshing day. The clock had just passed noon, and the cool breeze had begun to blow.

Shinkawahama First High School was in the middle of its lunch break, and the students were spending their short break in various ways. Naoto and Raquel, like many other students, had slipped out of the classroom and come to the courtyard with their lunch.

However, today they didn't have Haruka's homemade bento.

As a student council member, Haruka had been busy preparing for the upcoming cultural festival and had been coming to school very early every day lately. With her hectic mornings, there was simply no time to prepare three bentos, so Naoto, Raquel, and Haruka, who was probably working hard in the student council room right now, had sandwiches and bread they bought from the cafeteria.

"...Thanks for the meal,"

Sitting on the edge of a flowerbed, using it as a makeshift bench, Naoto finished his somewhat lacking lunch compared to Haruka's bento and poked a straw into a pack of café au lait like a post-meal coffee.

This area was shaded, and even on a sunny day like today, it was in the shadow of the school building and the trees. The drainage was poor, and it was a little damp, so not many people would choose this place as a lunch spot on such a nice day. Thanks to this, there was no one else around, and they were able to finish their lunch in peace.

Raquel had finished eating before Naoto and was now checking the size of the ground a little distance away. To an outsider, the reason for her suspicious behavior was the same as the reason they were having lunch in such a dark place.

This was the same place where Raquel had used magic to investigate the school before. And today, she had come here for the same purpose.

As usual, Naoto's job was to keep watch so that Raquel's magic would not be disturbed.

Taking his eyes off Raquel, who was looking around, her long golden ponytail swaying like a tail, Naoto slowly sipped his cafe au lait. As he swallowed the cheap sweetness, he felt a heavy, gloomy sensation.

(My stomach hurts...)

He didn't actually have any pain, and even if his stomach was upset, it would heal in no time, but he had been feeling that way for a while now. Ever since yesterday.

After Saya had left, he had eaten baumkuchen with Haruka and Raquel. He had felt a heavy weight in his stomach ever since then.

Raquel hadn't tried to pry any information about Saya since then. However, it didn't mean she had lost interest. Naoto often felt her presence or gaze, as if she was waiting for him to speak up. However, Naoto hadn't told Raquel anything yet. He had deliberately avoided the topic and spent the night with his mouth shut. As a result, the atmosphere between them had been awkward and strained since last night. Even during their lunch just earlier, despite sitting side by side, they hadn't exchanged a single word.

(This awkwardness is going to be a pain...)

They were going to be living in the same house for a while, but the current state of affairs felt suffocating and distracting. More importantly, he couldn't afford to be consumed by thoughts about his sister right now.

"Naoto." Startled, Naoto looked up.

"Whoa, you scared me!"

Raquel was standing far too close, her arms crossed. She looked down at him with a slight frown, clearly displeased.

".....How long are you going to keep me waiting?"

"Huh?"

"Don't 'huh' me. I'm asking you how long you're going to keep sulking like that." Although Raquel's voice wasn't raised, she was clearly annoyed. Naoto, with the straw still in his mouth, was taken aback and couldn't help but chuckle at her sudden outburst.

(She's angry all of a sudden...)

It probably wasn't sudden for Raquel, but when he remembered her calm expression just a few minutes ago as she ate her sandwich, he felt deflated. He had always considered himself quite short-tempered, but Raquel seemed even more so.

"Ugh... I guess I have to talk, huh?" Feeling awkward, he asked while chewing on his straw, and the temperature of Raquel's gaze dropped even further.

"What a foolish question. I'm actually more surprised that you're even considering *not* talking about this now. Do you really think you can keep this just a problem for yourself at this point, with that poor brain of yours? If you could just be a little less stupid, it would be a relief to me. You lowly servant."

Naoto was speechless at the barrage of words and took a sip of his café au lait to cover his embarrassment. The word "servant", spat out with more anger than contempt, suggested that Raquel was less disappointed and more irritated by Naoto's lack of empathy.

Raquel let out a small sigh and shrugged her narrow shoulders.

"She is a Drive user. As such, she will inevitably seek the 'Azure' sooner or later, even unconsciously."

"Azure."

Naoto's expression hardened almost reflexively at the word. It had been a few days since he'd heard it spoken, but it was always there, a fixed, shared goal that existed in both Naoto and Raquel's minds. An immovable weight they couldn't avoid being conscious of. That was the "Azure."

He understood that. But... Naoto looked down again.

"...When I drank your blood, information about Naoto Kurogane flowed in at the same time. However, there was no information regarding Saya Terumi among it. It was because you had deliberately cut off your awareness of Saya Terumi." Raquel's voice descended from outside his lowered line of sight. It was as if she were talking to herself rather than to Naoto, and her voice, which sounded like a monologue, drew Naoto's ears and attention.

Naoto bit down on his straw.

"Why are you turning a blind eye to it? Why are you so stubbornly closing your heart?" Raquel didn't demand an answer but presented it to Naoto as a question. "What is Saya Terumi to you?" It was a genuine question, devoid of sarcasm or malice.

Raquel had probably been wanting to ask Naoto that since yesterday. However, she had held back for just one night. She had refrained from asking.

It was an unusual consideration. To be considerate. Naoto grimaced bitterly, finishing the contents of his small paper cup, and raised his eyes.

Raquel's golden eyes were waiting. She stared straight at Naoto's chicken-like gaze, receiving it and catching it. As she stared, Raquel's expression clouded slightly in pain.

"You should tell me everything, Naoto. You're my... servant."

".....Why are you making that kind of face?"

"It's nothing."

"Liar. You look like..."

It seemed like she had a pained expression on her face...

Naoto stopped mid-sentence and crumpled the paper pack he was holding. He took a deep breath and exhaled from the bottom of his stomach.

"Alright," he whispered, his own voice sounding rough and blunt, prompting him to straighten his leaning body and look directly at Raquel. "I'll tell you. Actually, if I don't, I won't be able to concentrate on Spinner either." Soon, Naoto would have to fight a battle with the magician Spinner Superior. If a rift developed between him and Raquel because of Saya, no matter how trivial it was, it would be a major hindrance.

He couldn't afford to be dragged down by such sentimental things.

"But first, tell me. I want to know... What exactly is Soul Eater?"

Raquel had said it was the worst kind of drive that Saya possessed. Naoto knew his sister had a special ability, but he had no idea it was called a "Drive," and that it had such a sinister-sounding name. Raquel knew the truth. Naoto had the same desire and longing to know what he didn't know.

Raquel hesitated slightly. It seemed that, like Saya for Naoto, it wasn't a topic she could handle with a light heart. But after blinking her long-lashed eyelids once, Raquel nodded clearly, indicating she understood.

"Soul Eater is the worst and most powerful Drive. It's a power that endlessly absorbs the lives of others, converting them into its own power, ultimately transforming the user into a 'monster' that surpasses even Father." Sitting beside Naoto on the curb, Raquel began, gazing at the open, empty space in front of her.

“Clavis Alucard?”

“Yes.” Raquel answered Naoto's questioning tone with a casualness that suggested it was obvious. Naoto gasped softly. Remembering Raquel's father, Clavis, he shuddered inwardly. He had only met him once. But he would never forget the bottomless, instinctive fear he had felt at that time. His very presence felt like an attack.

To become even more monstrous than that. It was unimaginable. And to think that his own sister might become like that.

"However," Raquel said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear with a sigh, "that's only if the user's body can handle it."

".....What happens if it can't?"

"They can't contain the power they've amassed and will self-destruct."

"Self-destruct..." Naoto couldn't imagine what that state would be like. But he could tell it wasn't a happy ending.

However, Raquel's ominous explanation continued.

"But it's better if that happens. If the body withstands the power, and the user becomes a 'monster'... it would cause a disaster that would wipe out an entire city."

Self-destruction followed by calamity.

Naoto couldn't find the words this time either and simply swallowed the words. He had only heard about such things. He had no personal experience with it.

However, it was clear from Raquel's calm words that this was not a mere fabrication, nor was it exaggerated.

".....If Saya continues to use that Drive, will that happen...?"

"From what I saw yesterday, it's hard to say that the danger is imminent. The true Soul Eater absorbs life force indiscriminately from those nearby. Your sister, however, only seems to drain life force through direct contact, and at that level, she should be manageable." Raquel tilted her chin, as if confirming with herself.

Naoto didn't know what kind of face to make and hid his sullen expression with his cheek resting on his knee.

(Can I defeat her...?)

A small thorn, an unexpected word, caught in his chest. It was a word that should have come out.

He remembered the feel of his sister's hand on his neck yesterday. The hand that touched his neck had intended to drain the life out of him. Without hesitation, she had drawn her sword at Raquel, who had come to stop her, and tried to harm her.

Raquel needed Naoto to obtain the "Azure," and Naoto needed Raquel to obtain the "Azure." Therefore, anyone who wanted to kill either or both of them was an enemy and an obstacle that had to be eliminated. If an enemy approached, they must be defeated. That was a natural reaction.

Naoto felt a sense of daze. He realized that he had never intended to defeat Saya from the beginning.

A faint wind swept past, brushing away Naoto's lingering sentiment. Raquel's long golden hair swayed beside him.

"That's the end of my story. Now it's your turn," her golden eyes stared fixedly at Naoto. Of course, he had no intention of breaking his promise. Naoto exhaled to clear his mind and adjusted his posture.

"Uh, let's see..." He thought for a moment about where to start. Then, he decided to start with the big picture. "I'm going to tell you a complicated and confusing story. First... there's a very ancient family called 'Amanohokosaka' that has been around for a long time."

"I know it. Haruka mentioned that name. If I remember correctly... it's a family known for sealing demons in this country." Raquel replied calmly, and Naoto let out a small "Oh."

"Impressive. You have that kind of knowledge." Most people Naoto interacted with daily didn't know that name. Even many who weren't part of his daily life likely didn't recognize it.

It was a family that had protected the land of Japan from evil things since ancient times and sealed away harmful demons. That was the Amanohokosaka family. Though its bloodline has continued uninterrupted, its existence and fame have remained hidden, secretly fulfilling its role without public recognition.

"Then it'll be quicker to explain. That demon-sealing family, the head family, under the name 'Amanohokosaka', has four houses: 'Hajou', 'Kagetatsu', 'Hikagami', and 'Terumi'. I was born the direct eldest son of the 'Terumi' family... In other words, I'm the heir. Because I was born into such a special family, my mother taught me martial arts since I was a kid."

"I see. So you can move around a bit."

"I'm honored that you recognize that I can move around," Naoto shrugged, speaking in a teasing tone. His martial arts training felt like child's play compared to the superhuman moves Raquel had shown him. "My name is Kurogane, but that's my mother's maiden name. My family name is Naoto Terumi. So, even though I use a different surname, Saya is my real sister. And... she's been confined in the Amanohokosaka house for the past few years."

".....Confined?" Raquel understood the meaning behind that word. Her questioning tone sought further explanation.

Naoto glanced at her face, noticing her golden eyebrows furrowed in concern, and thought that she didn't need to make such a face for him to tell her the story.

"Saya was a sickly, quiet, ordinary child when she was younger. But five years ago, she suddenly changed. I think she awakened that mysterious power... Soul Eater." From this point, he needed to speak with conviction. Naoto continued in a clear tone, squeezing the crumpled paper pack even tighter in both hands.

"Saya used that power to consume almost everyone in the Terumi family. They all died. My father and mother died during this time... although my mother wasn't directly killed by her. Even so, Saya couldn't stop. It got to the point where it was dangerous, so the head of the Amanohokosaka clan came and sealed Saya away."

And so, Saya was confined, and five years passed.

But yesterday, that confinement ended, and she appeared before Naoto. It was a reunion that brought back memories of the tragic events from five years ago.

"Saya had always taken pride in the Terumi family since she was little. To me, it seemed like she was obsessively attached to it. She intends to inherit the Terumi family. For that, she apparently needs the 'Hunter's Eye,' the power of the Terumi family. Without it, she wouldn't be recognized as the heir."

Saying this, Naoto pressed his fingertip against his eyelid.

To Naoto, the Terumi family was something far removed from pride. He had no interest in the survival or prosperity of the family, and frankly, he didn't care.

Saya was the complete opposite. She intended to kill Naoto to take his eyes and inherit the Terumi family. She lived for that purpose.

(And she's still just a kid...)

Without attending school, without making friends, knowing little of study or play. Naoto felt a sense of pity for his sister, who possessed only the skills to kill and the power to do so.

"What about the letter from yesterday? What was that?" Raquel seemed to have no complaints about Naoto's explanation so far. She smoothed out the wrinkles between her brows and threw a new question.

Naoto remembered. He'd shoved it into the pocket of the pants he'd worn yesterday. He needed to throw it away before doing the laundry.

"Saya has become uncontrollable, or so the head of the Amanohokosaka clan said."

"It's not that she 'escaped' or 'broke the seal,' but rather that they 'can no longer contain her'?"

"Huh? What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying that Saya Terumi's emergence from the Amanohokosaka clan wasn't an accident. Perhaps the bonds that were supposed to hold her were loosened. Since they can no longer contain her, they might have simply stopped trying to hold her back... wouldn't you agree?"

"...Well, I guess."

That made sense.

There's a difference between being forcefully broken out of a cage and letting go because holding on any longer would injure your hands.

"We won't know what happened unless we ask the head of the family."

The letter didn't detail the circumstances on their side. Whether there was no time or no intention to explain, Naoto didn't know.

His expression darkened. If there was something going on in the Amanohokosaka family, it was surely something unpleasant. Just like when his mother died in front of him five years ago.

Memories resurfaced, bringing with them vivid images of the past.

It was in a dimly lit room, filled with the suffocating smell of blood. There was young Saya, dressed in a kimono, and his mother lying on the floor. A cold sword was plunged into the wet floor.

Naoto could only watch helplessly, feeling powerless and pathetic.

"Naoto?"

Naoto looked up, his throat constricting at Raquel's urging voice.

"Ah, it's nothing. For now... that's all there is to say about Saya. She wants to kill me to inherit the family. That's it." He thought his abrupt dismissal was a bit rough, but the Saya he knew now was exactly that kind of girl.

It was a bit painful to say. It hadn't always been this way. There was a time, faintly lingering in his memories, when things were different.

"I see... well, that's fine. I don't know what circumstances are behind Saya Terumi, but I don't want to complicate things any further. I have no intention of meddling." With a light clap, Raquel stood up from the curb. Naoto watched her long blonde hair and short skirt flutter as she moved.

"If anything happens, I'll fight Saya Terumi for you." She said this casually, looking ahead as if it were nothing. Caught off guard, Naoto struggled to comprehend her words, his mouth agape. After a few seconds of silence, Raquel turned back with a puzzled look.

"What's wrong? You look silly making that foolish face."

"No..."

Naoto thought it was unnecessary for Raquel to say something so harsh, but he couldn't voice his retort; it flickered through his mind and disappeared. He was surprised. He never thought Raquel would say such a thing.

"I was a bit taken aback, to be honest... I thought you would say something like, 'You can't be so complacent.' Or maybe you'd ignore me entirely," he said. Yet, the way she had spoken earlier almost seemed considerate, as if she were aware Naoto didn't want to fight Saya. Was Raquel Alucard someone capable of such human compassion?

(Ah, but that makes sense... I guess I've always been getting wrapped up in her insanity, so I didn't realize.)

Raquel always took action when it mattered. When Clavis confronted them, she trembled but stepped in front of Naoto. When Haruka was involved, she protected her with a barrier. Even when Naoto was on the verge of being killed by Spinner Superior, she raised her voice to stop it.

It had always been this way. Raquel had used her own power to help Naoto, who had been an unfortunate bystander.

(But still, this girl...)

The realization that fell into his heart was a pleasant one. It wasn't bad.

Naoto let out a breath and smiled slightly.

"That's sweet of you."

"Isn't it?"

With a hint of pride in her voice, Raquel turned her attention back to the magic circle, making her way toward the empty space behind the school building. Seeing her, Naoto withdrew his smile. There was something he needed to ask.

"Hey, Raquel." Raquel stopped and turned her head without replying. "If you have the 'Azure'... can you heal Saya?"

The "Azure" was a power that could turn any possibility into reality. So, if there was a possibility that Saya would not have awakened Soul Eater, could the "Azure" rewrite Saya's fate?

"...Do you want to save her?" Raquel asked, looking a little puzzled. Naoto considered what he was being asked.

Did he want to save her?

Saya.

Saya, who had killed his family, his relatives, and his parents.

After thinking, he looked up and answered.

"I want to save her. She's my family."

No matter how many people she had sent to their deaths with her hands, Naoto was still her brother, and Saya was still his sister. Raquel nodded, her eyes calm and direct, in response to Naoto's unwavering answer.

"If there's a possibility, then nothing is impossible for the 'Azure.'"

"I see... So, it all comes down to the Azure."

To remain human, to fulfill Raquel's unknown purpose, and to take away the terrifying power that allowed Saya to take the lives of others.

Naoto turned back to the path ahead and looked up at the clear sky, then stood up to throw away his lunch garbage.

There was, of course, a reason why she was using magic in the courtyard, despite risking other students seeing her at lunchtime.

What Raquel was about to use was a spell to sense the Azure's presence and investigate the number and movements of Drive users within the school. At the same time, she aimed to explore any areas within the school where the Azure's remnants could be felt, or if there were any people or objects associated with it.

Previously, that same magic had been able to identify several Drive users in the school and locate a student with traces of the Azure. This was a re-investigation.

The subjects were all the students and teachers in the school. She chose lunchtime to bring as many subjects as possible under the spell's influence.

"...Hah."

In the center of a large red magic circle drawn in the courtyard, Raquel focused her awareness while slightly lifting her toes off the ground. After a small exhale, she lowered her feet back to the earth. And then, her long hair, which had been dancing lightly in the wind, fell smoothly down her back.

"How was it? Did you find anything?" Naoto, who was keeping watch a short distance away to avoid stepping on the circle, turned around when he heard Raquel land and let out a faint sigh.

He tried not to look at Raquel while she was using magic. Memories he wanted to forget flashed through his mind. The sight of her white skin, completely exposed beneath her lifted skirt, stirred his thoughts.

(...Stop, don't remember.)

Not wanting to question his own morals, Naoto firmly locked the memory away.

"There's been no change in the Drive users' behavior. No reactions from the Azure remnants either." Raquel said, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear as she walked towards Naoto. The red magic circle faded from the ground where she walked, as if water was seeping into the ground.

It was a strange sight no matter how many times he saw it. What was that red ink-like substance that appeared just by tracing it with her fingers? As he wondered, Naoto put his hands on his hips.

"I see, then that's a relief."

"That's *not* good. It means there are no leads connecting us to Spinner." Raquel's golden eyes narrowed as she folded her arms. Naoto scratched his head awkwardly.

"Still, that guy seemed pretty eager to come out on his own again. If we just leave him be, won't he eventually pop up on his own?"

"What a fool. Spinner only appears when all the conditions are right for him. Do you really want to face Spinner head-on when he's fully prepared?"

"Of course not!" Naoto replied, closing his eyes as if offering a prayer to God.

Raquel was right. There was no reason to wait for Spinner to come to them. If he could avoid waiting, he preferred to do so.

"But it's good that nobody else from the school got involved. For now, at least..."

He looked up at the shabby school building. It's not like he was close with everyone. However, he didn't relish the thought of someone he recognized, someone he spent most of his days with, getting caught up in something dangerous.

"A lead, huh... Oh, that reminds me, I heard that all of Spinner's apostles are men." Naoto casually threw the thought to Raquel, who stood nearby. After a pause of about two seconds, Raquel looked at him and replied.

"That's right. The sensory organs are too different between men and women. If you want to control someone as an apostle, it's difficult to share sensations if they're not the same sex."

"Yeah, I heard that. And I also heard that it puts a huge burden on the sorcerer, so the maximum is probably fifteen..."

That means that besides Isa, the earth science teacher who had been an Apostle until recently, there could be as many as fourteen other apostles at worst. Perhaps Isa's position had already been filled, and they were now operating with a full team of fifteen.

"Why did they choose Isa as an apostle in the first place? I get that he's a man, but there must be some other criteria for selection."

"Perhaps it's because he could synchronize well as an Apostle... But if there are other reasons, we won't know unless we ask Spinner."

"That's true." No matter how much they speculated, they couldn't verify their answers.

".....By the way," Raquel began abruptly, as if she had finished her magic and there was no longer any need to be in such a dark place.

Naoto turned around, and waiting for him was Raquel's slightly annoyed gaze, just enough to be noticeable.

"That story you just told. You heard it from that woman," she said, referring to Kihiro Hikagami.

The Mitsurugi Agency... to eliminate immortals like Raquel or the threats lurking in the world...

A mysterious Drive user belonging to the organization.

'.....Are you still angry?'"

Feeling oddly accused, Naoto scratched his cheek. Raquel shook her head dramatically, her long hair swaying like a tail.

"I'm not angry. I'm just dumbfounded by your recklessness in going to see that woman alone, but that's a different emotion from anger, isn't it? It's just that... I haven't heard properly yet what you talked about with her alone."

"Don't put such a weird spin on it. Cut me some slack."

"But it's the truth."

"Alright, alright. I didn't say I wouldn't tell you."

Though Raquel probably didn't mean anything by it, her questioning tone made Naoto feel like he was being chastised for some immoral wrongdoing. This was no joke. He didn't deserve to be scolded. It was about yesterday morning.

A few hours before Saya suddenly showed up, and at an early time for lunch, Naoto had received a call the day before to come to a hotel near the station. It wasn't a simple hotel where businessmen would stay, nor was it a sleazy hotel that suited the nightlife. It was a full-fledged hotel where a luxurious chandelier greeted you in the lobby, with soft carpets underfoot.

The designated place was a members-only bar lounge on the top floor. Riding an elevator that moved silently, Naoto met Kihiro Hikagami in the back of the lounge, enduring the gaze of the waiters who looked at him like a foreign object.

It was a room like an observation deck, with large glass windows all around the outer wall. Even though it was a weekday, it was daytime, so there were few customers in the bar lounge, and it was sparse, quiet, and the subdued classical jazz in the background was inducing sleepiness.

On a soft sofa that made him feel as if he were sinking in, Naoto listened to Kihiro talk about Spinner. He heard about how Isa, who had attacked Haruka the other day, survived. She

mentioned that even if he managed to reintegrate into society, they would ensure he would never appear before Naoto again. She also said she would dispose of all the photos Isa had collected of Haruka.

After hearing all that, Kiiro leaned closer on the sofa, pressing down on his hand with her own. Naoto felt the air in the room heat up. He tried to pull away, but Kiiro held him with her hand and leaned in, whispering as if begging for a kiss.

"Hey... Naoto-kun. Won't you be with me?"

Up until then, Kiiro had maintained a serious atmosphere, though it was difficult to be completely serious with her. Still, she suddenly shifted to a more overtly flirtatious demeanor, her eyes glistening with allure.

This made Naoto tense up even more.

"I don't get what you mean."

"I'll do anything you want, Naoto-kun. I'll protect you. I'll take care of Spinner Superior for you... and I can heal your body too." While holding Naoto's hand down, Kiiro's other hand began to move toward his chest. Her fingers sensually traced Naoto's body over his clothes, tracing his collarbone and stroking his right arm.

A chill ran down Naoto's spine. He interpreted it as disgust. He didn't like being touched by Kiiro. It made him feel very uneasy.

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Yeah, what is it?"

"Why are you so obsessed with me?" That was the biggest reason why Naoto felt uncomfortable with Kiiro's touch.

His relationship with Kiiro was shallow—at least for him. They hadn't known each other for long, and his understanding of her was minimal. Yet, Kiiro touched Naoto with an intimacy that didn't match that relationship. It was as if she was trying to drag him into a pit of moral decay, and he hesitated to take a step. Of course, who would be stupid enough to step into a swamp knowing it was a swamp?

Kiiro leaned her cheek against Naoto's shoulder and smiled with her glossy lips.

"Naoto-kun, would you call it love at first sight?"

"No."

"Then it's fate."

"Can you stop joking around?" Naoto looked at Kiiro with half-closed eyes, exasperated. She was always like this. It was hard to tell where her sincerity ended and her jokes began. Kiiro pouted at Naoto's reply.

"Oh, come on. I thought you'd at least notice. So annoying!"

"So annoying'...?" Naoto never expected to hear such a phrase directly aimed at him.

Ignoring Naoto's mental exhaustion, Kiiro pressed her index finger against her soft lips, thinking as she leaned closer with her voluptuous body.

"Hmm, that's a problem. I don't think I can explain it in words, and even if I did, I don't think Naoto-kun would understand..."

"Are you mocking me?"

"Oh, that's right!" Interrupting Naoto's words, Kiiro lifted the finger from her lips and smiled happily. In a flash of inspiration, she quickly pressed Naoto's hand against her chest.

"Hey, wait a minute...!" Naoto desperately tried to pull his hand away. The hand that had been pulled close had forcefully unbuttoned the top buttons of her blouse, exposing a large portion of her chest and slipping inside.

He could feel the richly exposed bulge of her exposed breasts directly against his palm. The damp sensation of skin, a body temperature slightly higher than his own, and its firm, weighty fullness.

This was bad. Naoto's instincts were signaling danger.

He tried to pull his hand away, but Kiiro pressed it harder against her chest.

"No, touch me properly. Listen."

"What are you thinking...?"

Naoto fell silent, taken aback by the absence of Kiiro's usual flirtation in her voice. In his palm, there was still the unique softness that he never encountered in his daily life. Deep within that fullness, Kiiro's heart was beating.

"Don't you get it?"

"What?"

"Oh, you're hopeless!"

With a faint scent of perfume, Kiiro smiled teasingly as she lifted Naoto's other hand. She placed that hand against his chest, over his left side.

"Well?" she asked again, her violet eyes smiling invitingly.

A shiver ran down Naoto's spine. He couldn't help but hold his breath. He finally understood what Kiiro was saying.

A heartbeat.

Two heartbeats, rather. His and hers, both pulsing in the palms of his hands. Their rhythms were perfectly synchronized, as if they were one.

Naoto's heart raced. And so did Kiiro's. It was as if their hearts were one and the same.

"You see, Naoto-kun, we're two halves of the same whole. Together, we can finally become 'one.' I can love every part of you. No, only I can love all of you. If it's 'Kurogane Naoto,' then I can love it. Even if your right arm is part of that arrogant bloodsucker, I can love you. I don't care about the Mitsurugi Agency or Clavis Alucard. All I want is..."

Her voice, drenched in lust, breathed hotly against Naoto's neck. The rough, wanton breathing tickled his skin.

Their heartbeats quickened, Naoto's and Kiiro's. Blending together, the sound of blood pulsing in their heads throbbed loudly.

"All I want is Naoto Kurogane." She murmured dreamily in a burning voice, lost in pleasure. With a distant look in her eyes, far removed from her usual calm, Kiiro let out a deep, satisfied sigh.

"It's fine, Naoto-kun... you can crush me... however you like."

For a moment, he was stunned. But then he realized what she meant and violently jerked his hand away, as if seared by hot iron. He scrambled off the sofa, pulling away from her. The fingers that had just caressed her soft breasts were now slightly reddened and damp. It was his right hand. The small amount of blood on it seemed to vanish into his skin as if it was soaked up by water.

"Fufufu... now I'm a little bit a part of you, Naoto-kun." Kiiro murmured dreamily, her cheeks flushed, her eyes glazed over with lust. She ran her tongue along her sensual lips.

Naoto felt no pleasure or arousal at the sight. Instead, he clenched his right hand, which had absorbed her blood, and forced himself to calm his ragged breathing. Grinding his heel into the soft carpet, he turned and fled the lounge.

—

"Did your heartbeats synchronize with that woman's?"

Naoto told Raquel only about how his heartbeat and Kiirō's had perfectly synced. He omitted the part about her blood being absorbed and what she had said. Raquel had been waiting for him in front of the hotel after the incident, so she probably had a better understanding of his state immediately afterward than he did.

"Yeah. I don't really understand it, but it was disturbingly in sync." Naoto nodded, his confusion evident. Raquel frowned, clearly puzzled. "So, what does that mean? Does that make Kiirō Hikagami..."

Naoto's question was cut off by Raquel's mumbling. She seemed lost in thought, her hand covering her mouth as she pondered. Naoto sighed. It seemed Raquel didn't have an answer either. Although she seemed to have some ideas based on the fragments of her words, it was unlikely she could provide a coherent explanation until she had thought it through.

"Anyway, that's what happened with Kiirō. We should probably head back. Lunch break is almost over." Naoto said, checking the time on his phone. Their next class was Japanese language, which he wasn't bad at, but their teacher's monotone voice was sleep-inducing, and it would be difficult to stay awake on a full stomach.

"Let's continue this after school."

"Sounds good to me. Let's head back."

It was a relief that Raquel didn't seem to have any aversion to the idea of "school". She readily agreed to Naoto's suggestion and they turned away from the empty schoolyard where there was no trace of the magic circle.

As Naoto and Raquel walked side by side and approached the corridor between the main building and the special classroom wing, a familiar face suddenly appeared from the latter.

"Oh, Kurogane-kun, Alucard-san."

With a voice that was sharp and confident, she had a tall, slender figure with flowing black hair that cascaded down her back. The one who greeted them was Kana Kirishima, the student council president of Shinkawahama First High School.

Naoto instinctively came to a halt, nearly stumbling.

Kana was an imposing figure with a calm demeanor that belied her young age. Her confident manner and dignified presence had drawn many votes her way during the student council elections, including Naoto's.

Little did anyone know that just a few days ago, she had been threatened and bullied by Isa, an Apostle of Spinner's. Only Naoto and Raquel had witnessed the tears streaming down her usually composed face.

"Did you two have lunch together again? You're so close. Haruka must be jealous." Kana smiled, her tone slightly teasing as she held a stack of papers to her chest.

Raquel froze, her body rigid as if electrocuted, awkwardly averted her gaze and slipped behind Naoto. Caught between Kana and Raquel, Naoto raised an eyebrow and twisted his mouth.

"Why would Haruka care?"

"Are you serious? You're quite the cruel person, aren't you?"

"Cut it out. Haruka and I are just friends, okay?"

"Is that so? Well, that's what it seems to you." Kana's words carried a hidden meaning that was clear to anyone listening. If it had been any other classmate, Naoto might have given a casual retort. But against Kana, he could only groan in frustration.

"Um... Kirishima-senpai, there's something I want to ask you, if that's alright?"

"Me? Of course. Go ahead."

"Do you remember Isa?" Kana blinked, seemingly unsure of Naoto's intentions.

"Isa... do you mean Mr. Isa from the Earth Science department? Of course I remember him. Until last week, he was teaching at this school. I heard he retired due to ill health. It's such a shame."

Kana frowned, her expression softening as if to reproach Naoto for addressing his teacher so informally. It was more a fleeting sympathy for someone she had had as a teacher than any real concern for the person who had threatened her.

"Oh... I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it. It's fine if you know him," Naoto forced a smile, trying to cover up his blunder. Kana looked at him suspiciously and tilted her head slightly.

"Is that so? That's a strange question."

“No, there’s no deep meaning...”

“Ah, there you are, Kirishima-senpai!”

Before Naoto could think of an excuse, a familiar male voice cut in.

The owner of the voice came bustling up, panting slightly. “Oh, Naoto and Raquel! What a surprise. Where have you two been? Don’t miss out on any event flags, Naoto!” He flashed a bright, carefree smile at Naoto. It was Shinnosuke Fukuda, Naoto’s classmate and best friend.

“How can you say that without any shame?” Naoto retorted. What event flags? Shinnosuke’s usual playful banter naturally drew a wry smile from Naoto.

Kana’s imposing presence seemed to soften somewhat in the face of Shinnosuke’s carefree aura. While it was a bit irritating to feel relieved by his presence, Naoto was grateful to have avoided the question about Isa.

Noticing Shinnosuke was carrying a bundle of files that looked to be twice as heavy as Kana’s stack, Naoto asked, “What’s with that huge load?”

“It’s the records from last year’s cultural festival. You know I’m in the library committee, right? I’m keeping them,” Shinnosuke said, making an exaggerated effort to readjust the files in his arms. Then he turned to Kana. “Sorry, I’m in a hurry. I’ve found everything. Should I take it all to the student council room?”

“Yes, please. I’m heading there too, so let’s go together.”

“Okay!”

“See you later.” Kana gave a light bow and started walking away with Shinnosuke in tow.

“See you later!” Shinnosuke followed Kana, struggling under the weight of the heavy files as they entered the main building.

“The cultural festival...” Naoto muttered to himself.

Naoto watched Kana and Shinnosuke leave, somewhat lost in thought. However, what occupied his mind was entirely unrelated.

“She didn’t remember, did she?” Raquel said, approaching from behind with a composed expression, as if she hadn’t been hiding like a shadow, afraid of Kana’s presence.

Naoto was used to Raquel's nonchalant attitude. As soon as Kana was gone, she puffed out her chest as usual, and Naoto simply nodded in response, a wry smile playing on his lips.

"Yeah. I wonder what they did to her memory."

Kana didn't remember anything about Isa, not the threats, nor what had happened between them. Rather than pondering the methods used, Naoto was simply glad she had forgotten. There was no good reason for her to remember such a thing.

What troubled him was the eerie presence of the Mitsurugi Agency, the organization responsible for manipulating Kana's memory.

"I don't think about it often, but are they still watching us?"

Kihiro had once mentioned that the Mitsurugi Agency was monitoring both Naoto and Raquel. They claimed to have no interest in interfering with their personal lives, but the idea of being watched was unsettling.

Raquel seemed to feel the same way and snorted in annoyance.

"The Mitsurugi Agency... they must be moving behind the scenes. We can't just sit around waiting for clues to appear."

They didn't know when Kihiro or that sinister organization would strike again. They had to settle things with Spinner and find a way to reach the surprise before that happened.

"So what are we going to do? Just go around creating magic circles and searching blindly?"

"That wouldn't be a bad idea. But... there's something more fundamental, something important." With only five minutes left until lunch break ended, Raquel walked alongside Naoto, looking straight ahead as she spoke in a firm tone.

"Something important?" Naoto was puzzled. He pointed at himself questioningly, and Raquel nodded confidently, as if she had already taken on the role of his mentor.

"Of course. To face a powerful enemy, we need... training."

Naoto was speechless for a moment. He scratched his head, wondering where she had gotten such an idea.

—

The white moon hung in the sky. It looked like a sliver of a crescent moon, a gaping window in the night sky, as if someone was peering in.

Perhaps this thought arose because Naoto had been reminded of the Mitsurugi Agency's surveillance during the day. Or maybe it was because he was about to step into this surreal world, which seemed out of place on such a peaceful night.

Stepping out from the brightly lit apartment into the dimly lit night, Naoto retied his loose sneaker laces.

"Don't dawdle," came an impatient voice from a few steps ahead.

"I know, I know," Naoto replied, glancing up casually.

Even in October, the air turned chilly at this late hour. Raquel stood in the darkness of the night, wrapped in her own dark black cloak. If one only focused on her appearance, she looked just like she did on that night they first met. However, there was now a crucial difference. Raquel was wearing a blouse and skirt under her cloak.

Naoto joined Raquel, his sneakers tapping lightly against the ground. Suddenly, the sound of high heels approaching from ahead caught his attention.

"Oh? You two are going out at this hour?"

At first, Naoto thought it was Kiiro, but it was Yuki, Haruka's mother and his aunt. Dressed in a neatly arranged milk tea-colored pantsuit, Yuki looked ready for work. It was past nine at night, well past dinner time. It seemed early for her to be returning home from work.

"You're home early, Yuki-san," Naoto replied, surprised. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Raquel flinch and step closer to him.

Seeing Raquel's reaction, Yuki smiled brightly. "I can't keep working late every day. Sometimes I want to eat my daughter's cooking at a decent hour."

"Well, it's not exactly a decent hour, is it?"

"Details, details. More importantly, where are you two going? Out late at night alone with a girl... that's suspicious." Yuki smiled knowingly and brought her fingers to her mouth. She glanced at Raquel with a look of childlike curiosity. Despite working late every day and getting up early, she seemed full of energy.

Naoto grimaced and scratched his head.

"It's not suspicious at all. We're just going to the bookstore by the station. It's open until ten."

"A bookstore? You?"

“No, not me. Her.” Naoto pointed at Raquel, who was nodding vigorously, her expression exaggerated.

It was a lie. He had told the same lie to Haruka just a few minutes ago.

“Hmm.” Yuki replied, her voice sounding thoughtful. Despite trying to appear calm, Naoto was incredibly nervous. Yuki was sharp. She had caught him in lies countless times before. It felt like she could always sense when he was being dishonest.

But...

“Well, be careful. Don’t worry Haruka too much,” Yuki accepted Naoto’s lie effortlessly and adjusted the work bag on her other shoulder. Naoto didn’t know if she had believed him or simply chosen to ignore his lie. If he asked, it would be like admitting to the lie himself.

Yuki patted Naoto lightly on the shoulder and went into the apartment building, her steps surprisingly light for someone who had been working late. Naoto watched her go until she disappeared into the orange glow of the hallway, then turned back to the night.

“Let’s go.” he said, patting Raquel on the shoulder as Yuki had done to him. Startled, Raquel seemed to snap back to reality.

“Ah!? Oh... yeah, let’s go. No dawdling.”

“I’ve heard that before.” Naoto wanted to say, “I should be the one telling you that,” but he kept it to himself. He ran his hand through his hair and started walking. Their destination was near Shinkawahama Station. But instead of the bookstore, they were headed for a darker, more secluded area.

This was the beginning of their... training.

Running through the narrow alleyways wasn’t difficult. Jumping into the shadows away from the streetlights and moving farther from the bright station wasn’t scary.

The night air was pleasantly cool, and under normal circumstances, Naoto would have enjoyed the walk. Despite the cloudy sky, the high moon continued to cast its silvery light upon the earth. But right now, he had no room to appreciate the autumn night’s ambiance.

“Damn it... how long is this going to last?!” As he ran deeper into the narrow alley, which was too small for cars, Naoto vented his frustration between heavy breaths. Close behind him, something was following, keeping an uncomfortably close distance. An occasional clicking sound from somewhere outside his vision sent a shiver of disgust and fear down his spine.

Naoto was being chased.

With an unyielding persistence, something the size of his torso was pursuing him through the darkness and sudden bursts of streetlight. It was an insect as large as Naoto's torso.

Its dirty brown shell resembled oxidized oil, with a creepy luster reminiscent of a jewel beetle. It had four wings that buzzed unpleasantly as it flitted about. Its silhouette resembled that of a bee, but instead of a sharp stinger, it had a round mouth from which a liquid capable of burning concrete simmered, hidden behind serrated fangs. Just a moment ago, it had bitten his arm, and he still felt the searing pain of burnt flesh.

Where a bee would have a mouth, this creature had enlarged legs, and four eyes that fixed on Naoto's back as he ran.

"How long do you plan on running? This is training. It's pointless if you don't fight back!" Raquel called out, her voice carried on the wind as she gracefully descended from a nearby building. She joined Naoto, her expression bright and carefree, as she effortlessly ran beside him.

Training. Tonight's "event," as Raquel called it, was essentially a hunting game. Using her magic, Raquel had located an Apostle of Spinner's, and now Naoto was supposed to gain combat experience by defeating it.

They had left the house around ten o'clock and had spent some time preparing Raquel's magic at a secluded spot near the station. After following a faint magical trace, they had finally found their target. But the moment the creature realized Naoto was there, it had detached itself from its host and attacked with ferocious intent.

Of course, Naoto had come here intending to defeat the creature. He wanted nothing more than to stop running and turn around, to punch the giant, grotesque, bee-like thing. But it was too close. If he stopped and turned, the creature would be able to attack him before he could react.

(I never want to experience that again...)

Just moments before, he had been ambushed by the severe pain from a bug that had been lurking by the tracks under the station platform after the last train had left. The wound had healed within three seconds, but the psychological shock of being attacked by such an unnatural creature was not so easily forgotten.

"Hi-i-i-i!"

As if on cue, a wet sound splattered behind Naoto, followed by the creature's acidic fluid spraying in the direction he was running. A splash landed on his face. He felt a burning sensation near his eye and his vision blurred white.

He wiped his face with the back of his hand, trying to clear his vision. The wound was already gone, but the pool of the creature's fluid where he had jumped over had melted the asphalt, leaving a sticky, cotton-candy-like substance.

"R-Raquel, what should I do?"

Naoto had never faced one of Spinner's Apostles so directly before. The confusion and fear overwhelmed him, and Naoto felt himself slipping into a mild panic.

"You're pathetic. Are you really from the Demon Sealing clan?"

"That's the Amanohokosaka! Compared to that, we're just an afterthought... besides, what I was doing was with humans, not fighting against monsters like this!"

Naoto wondered if the martial arts he'd learned for fighting humans would be effective against this creature.

Skating alongside Naoto as if on ice, Raquel sighed, treating him like a slow child. "You're an idiot. That's why I'm giving you this real combat experience."

"You're doing this for me? I'm so grateful, I could cry!"

"We're going to waste the whole night at this rate."

"If you think so, then help me out a little!"

"Honestly... you really are a handful."

Shaking her head in exasperation, Raquel lowered her body without slowing down. Then, she kicked off the ground and jumped high. With a powerful leap, she jumped into the air, pulling Naoto up with her.

"Whoa!" Naoto exclaimed as he was lifted off the ground. He landed hard on the asphalt, wincing in pain as his backside and legs stung. But when he looked up, his breath caught in his throat.

The creature, unable to keep up with the sudden change of pace, had overshot where Naoto had been and was now further down the alleyway. It quickly sensed Naoto's presence and turned around, its wings buzzing.

But there was now a safe distance between them – a distance perfect for a fight.

"Naoto."

"I know!" Naoto replied roughly in response to Raquel's urging. He clenched his fists and began to run.

His target, a creature with enormous red eyes, stared at Naoto. It lifted its thick legs, making an odd clicking sound as it raised its lower body, filled with corrosive acid. Its round mouth was pointed at Naoto like a gun.

To be honest, Naoto was terrified. He wanted to lament why he was doing this. But he pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind and focused on what was in front of him.

He took a deep step forward, feeling the hard ground beneath his feet, and pulled back his fist. As if waiting for this, the creature's bloated belly trembled, and a glob of acid was ejected from its round, toothed mouth, as if firing a cannonball.

If it hit him directly, it would be right in the face. But Naoto twisted his body at an unnatural angle, dodging the acid from close range almost the same time as the bug's counterattack.

(Huh? I dodged it?)

Naoto was surprised. He had taken a deep step forward, and his movements had been quick. He should have been completely defenseless against the attack. But as the bug's movements registered in his vision, his body moved on its own. The bug's movements were much slower than he had anticipated. He was more agile than he realized.

"Take this!" With all his might, Naoto threw his fist down onto the bug's head, adding the force of his body behind it. His fist, thrust straight up from below, caught the creature's large eye and pierced through the tough, jelly-like substance. Body fluids splattered, and a sticky substance covered him. Despite the unpleasant sensation, Naoto's arm had pierced straight through the bug.

"Ugh... gross..."

As he realized what he had done, the thought of fighting was replaced by disgust. With a shudder, he kicked the creature's body, which was convulsing violently, and pulled his arm out. The slimy feeling was raw and real, leaving no room for excuses or dreams.

Resigned to his situation, Naoto swung his arm and kicked the creature that was trying to grab him. With a cracking sound, the creature slammed into the wall of the nearby building. Even then, it got up and tried to fly, but Naoto, who had only been able to run away until now, grabbed it and pulled it towards him.

With all his might, Naoto slammed the creature into the ground. He stomped on it repeatedly until it couldn't move anymore.

“Ugh, haah, haah... haah, ha... it smells so bad...”

It smelled like rotten meat. Breathing heavily, Naoto grimaced and stepped away from the now motionless bug. Acid was leaking from the creature's abdomen, slowly dissolving the asphalt. Overlooking the gruesome sight, Naoto wiped its fluid off his arm and tried to calm his stomach, which felt like it was about to spit out its dinner.

“...You took that down surprisingly easily.”

“Surprisingly? I was fighting for my life here! You could at least say something a little kinder.” Naoto shot a disgruntled glance at Raquel, who had landed next to him, draped in a vibrant breeze like a dress.

The acidic liquid from the creature he had crushed had burned his leg, but perhaps because he was so excited, the wound had healed before he felt any pain. Only the holes in his jeans remained as a reminder. His T-shirt was also torn and melted in several places. It had been a good idea to leave his hoodie with Raquel, knowing he was going to get dirty.

As Raquel returned the gray hoodie he had been carrying, she widened her eyes in apparent surprise at his complaint. “I was complimenting you,” she said.

Was she? Naoto didn't have the energy to argue. It seemed he had grown up with much warmer compliments.

“But...” Raquel continued, her voice unexpectedly sincere. Naoto's expression softened. “You didn't seem to be trying your hardest since I started helping you.” Her golden eyes locked onto his, and Naoto felt a lump in his throat. He looked down at his dirty hands, at his right hand that had pierced the creature's head.

“...Ah.” With a sigh, Naoto nodded. He had a vague sense of what Raquel was trying to say. If he had to put it into words, it would be “unexpected.”

More than unexpected. It was unbelievable. His right hand had worked as a powerful weapon. And maybe it wasn't just his right hand. It felt like every part of him had adapted to the fight with surprising ease.

Naoto could feel his heart beating faster than usual.

Chapter 9: Interference

The clock was nearing three in the morning.

A few minutes after Naoto had defeated Spinner's Apostle in the alleyway that night, men in black suits and white lab coats had appeared. They were from the Mitsurugi Agency, the same organization he had encountered at school the other night.

After efficiently collecting the creature's corpse, they told Naoto to go home, assuring him they would clean up the mess. They then began to collect samples of the creature's scattered bodily fluids.

Watching their skilled work, Naoto felt a sense of resignation. Surely, by tomorrow or the day after, the alleyway would be repaired as if nothing had happened. With no reason to linger, he decided to head home, but Raquel didn't seem particularly cheerful. Naoto understood why. He didn't feel good either.

It was past one in the morning. The fact that the Mitsurugi Agency had arrived so quickly and was so well-equipped this late at night meant they were under constant surveillance.

It made him sick to think that they probably had a detailed report of how he had run away and how Raquel had helped him, including their trivial banter. Still, he was grateful to have them take care of the scene, which they could never have handled on their own.

"Ugh... I'm so sleepy..." Naoto sighed as he soaked in the hot bath he had drawn as soon as he got home. He didn't mind staying up late, but tonight was particularly draining. Searching for a monstrous creature in the dead of night, being chased, and finally getting covered in some disgusting, unknown liquid - training was tougher than he had expected.

Naoto pulled his right arm out of the water and sniffed it.

(Is it really clean now?)

He had scrubbed himself more thoroughly than ever before. He was sure that the unpleasant smell and feeling were completely gone. Satisfied, he returned his arm to the warm water and gently rubbed it. As he relaxed, various images from that night flashed through his mind.

(Come to think of it, Kiiro wasn't there.)

The organization had been waiting for his "training" to finish. The situation was nearly the same as when he defeated Isa, but Kiiro was absent. She seemed to have a higher position than the men in black, and she probably didn't have the time to come out for every little incident like this. Whatever the reason, Naoto was relieved.

(If she had been there, I would have been stuck here for another thirty minutes...)

He chuckled to himself in the bath and then remembered something.

Kihiro's seductive smile at the hotel lounge lingered in Naoto's mind. Those suggestive words, one after another, and the soft, almost unreal feel of her... skin.

Naoto unconsciously placed his palm against his left chest. He wondered if Kihiro's heart was still beating in the same rhythm beneath her own chest. The thought sent a chill down his spine. After all, it was a heart. The idea that it was exactly like someone else's was anything but comforting.

"Ugh... whatever, I don't want to think about anything anymore..." He was about to continue when the sound of a suddenly opened door interrupted him. "...Huh!?"

For a second, he couldn't comprehend the situation. Even after a few seconds, it still didn't register. Furrowing his brows in confusion, Naoto turned to see who it was, his mouth half-open in a daze as he wondered what was going on.

In that instant, his thoughts completely froze.

Standing at the door was Raquel.

Considering who else was in the house, it might not have been unusual. But the fact that Raquel was completely naked, her long blond hair down, and was about to enter the bathroom was not just unusual, it was impossible to ignore.

"You... what are you..."

"Oh, you're still in here?" Raquel pulled her loose hair behind her ear and stepped into the wet bathroom. Naoto immediately sank deep into the bathtub, trying to hide.

"W-w-w-what are you doing?! Why did you come in?!"

"Naoto, it's late. You should think about the neighbors."

"Don't tell me to be considerate when you're naked!"

"One minute you say to learn common sense, and the next you tell me not to talk about it. You really are an emotionally unstable man."

"Whose fault is that...?" Naoto knew it was pointless to argue, but he couldn't help himself. Still, he couldn't just stare at her, so he shrank back in the bathtub.

Seeing this, Raquel let out a knowing "Ah" and a weary smile.

"Don't worry. Seeing a servant naked won't make me feel anything special. It's like seeing a dog with or without clothes." She said casually, as if teasing Naoto.

Naoto looked down. It's not like he wanted her to feel something special, but it hurt to be dismissed so easily.

Ignoring Naoto's hurt feelings, Raquel placed her small butt on the bathroom chair. She reached for the showerhead and turned on the warm water.

She was serious about taking a bath together. Realizing Raquel's intentions, Naoto felt his face pale. Yet, despite the situation, she continued nonchalantly.

"Naoto. I permit you, my servant, to wash your master's hair," Raquel said, brushing her long golden hair away from her chest. Her golden eyes urged him on, gazing at Naoto without any embarrassment or ulterior motives. It was as if she was simply acknowledging him, as he was, without any impure thoughts. It made him feel almost spoiled.

"How long are you going to keep staring at me like that? Hurry up. It's impolite to keep your master waiting."

"Okay, okay. I got it..." Naoto replied, somewhat annoyed. If he hesitated any longer, it would seem like he was the only one who saw Raquel as a woman. And that wouldn't do.

With a sigh of resignation, Naoto stood up.

(Don't look, don't look, don't look...)

He chanted this mantra in his mind as he moved behind Raquel, who was seated on a chair.

He had never been so grateful for a fogged-up mirror. Even though he was drawn to her translucent skin and slender shoulders, he managed to gather her hair in a bundle.

"Wow..." he said involuntarily. Raquel turned her head.

"What?"

"N-no. Your hair... it's beautiful." It was an embarrassing thing to say, but he couldn't help himself. The feel of her hair in his hands reminded him of golden silk. It was smooth and silky, sliding cool against his palm.

"Yes, it is," Raquel replied indifferently. Her short answer made it clear that she didn't have any particular feelings about her own hair.

"Yeah, I don't know much about women's hair, and I've never seen blond hair like this before. But I think it's beautiful," Naoto said with a wry smile as he ran the warm water through the beautiful hair in his hands.

It really was beautiful hair. And yet, he felt it was a shame that Raquel didn't seem to appreciate its beauty. It would have been nice if she could look up at people with her chin held high and simply take pride in such a normal thing.

Now that he thought about it, there were times in kindergarten when he had bathed with Haruka, but he had never washed her hair. As for Saya, he couldn't even remember bathing with her, given her frail health.

(This is the first time I've ever washed a woman's hair)

Her hair was so thin and soft. He wasn't sure how to handle it. Is this how it's supposed to be? He carefully applied the shampoo that Haruka had bought for Raquel, working it into the golden hair that flowed under the water. The long strands seemed to wrap around his fingers, yet they easily slipped away from the ends.

It felt like he was handling something fragile. It was an unfamiliar task. His hands fumbled awkwardly, and he started to lose track of how he usually washed his own hair.



Still, Naoto rinsed the shampoo out, applied the conditioner, and rinsed again. By the time he washed Raquel's shoulders and back, where her wet hair clung, the embarrassment and discomfort of a high school boy had considerably faded.

"There. I'm done." He said, avoiding her gaze as he turned off the shower and leaned it against the wall. Raquel gathered her wet hair to one side and lightly squeezed out the excess water, letting out a shallow, disappointed sigh.

"You're not very good at this."

"Shut up! I've never done this before! If you want it done well, don't make me do it!" Naoto's voice echoed loudly against the bathroom walls. For a moment, he panicked, wondering if someone had heard him. Raquel remained calm. She turned to look at Naoto with her big eyes, which softened as if to ease the tension.

"Well then, that's fine. For a first time, I'll revise my evaluation and say you did a pretty good job." Naoto felt his temples twitch at her almost smug expression.

"...Should I say thank you?"

(Shouldn't I be the one getting thanked instead?)

Naoto felt a sense of fatigue that went beyond mere dissatisfaction. Reluctantly finishing the task, he began to rise from the bath. However, Raquel grabbed his arm with her wet hand, stopping him.

"What's wrong...?" Naoto asked with an exasperated look. Raquel answered with a serious expression.

"What do you mean? Next, it's your body. Wash it."

"Please, Raquel-sama!!"

In a burst of energy that even surprised himself, Naoto dropped to his knees in the bath. He thought he had come to the bath to relax. But now he realized that the bath held various potential dangers.

Soaking in the reboiled water, Naoto felt cornered, resting his arms on the edge of the tub. Right in front of him was Raquel, who had just washed her hair and, reluctantly, washed her own body. She was sitting comfortably between Naoto's legs, which were awkwardly bent, hugging her knees in the tub, enjoying the Japanese bath.

How should he feel looking at that? Unsure, Naoto covered his forehead with his hands, leaning against the edge of the tub.

"How are you feeling?" Raquel's voice echoed slightly from in front of him. Naoto returned his gaze.

"Feeling? I mean, it's fine. I'm really tired, though." Naoto replied, letting out a deep exhale. He had been quite tired during the Isa event, but today...

Between running around and getting covered in sticky fluids, he was mentally exhausted. His body could heal physical wounds quickly enough, but it couldn't fix his mental state after experiencing death.

Naoto absentmindedly looked at his right hand, the one that had been destroyed and replaced. Then he remembered something.

"Hey, there's something I wanted to ask. During that fight earlier, while I was being chased, I thought my opponent was too fast for me, but as soon as we faced each other, his movements seemed to slow down. And when I punched him, it felt almost too easy taking him down. It was like my body felt a lot lighter than before..." He couldn't quite put it into words, but he definitely felt different from when he was fighting Isa. His body was performing at a much higher level than he expected.

Raquel dropped her gaze to her knees, which were illuminated by her golden eyes.

"I see, so that's how it is."

"How what is?" Naoto asked, raising an eyebrow as he sat up straighter in the tub.

The water rippled. Breaking through the waves, Raquel touched Naoto's right hand. Perhaps because of the warm water, her usually cool fingertips felt warm now.

"Your right hand is made from my blood. I mentioned that before, remember?" Naoto nodded. He looked at his arm, which still appeared to be an ordinary human arm. "The fusion between my blood and yours is progressing. The vampire blood is starting to mix with your own, strengthening you. ... Normally, this process should be much slower."

"W-wait a minute. Isn't it bad that it's progressing so fast?" Naoto submerged his arm, which Raquel had touched, into the water and instinctively leaned forward. As he got closer to her pale skin, he felt flustered. But at that moment, feelings of embarrassment were secondary.

Raquel, observing Naoto's panic and agitation, blinked her long eyelashes once. "Normally, yes, it would be bad. It means that your transformation into a vampire is advancing faster than it should."

"Wha... wait, then...!"

"The acceleration increased because my father reattached your arm. He overwrote the magic I had used to slow the process."

Naoto's mind struggled to keep up with the sudden and unexpected information. Raquel's calm demeanor helped him understand, but once he grasped it, dissatisfaction set in.

So what? It's great that he was getting stronger, but it was all thanks to Clavis. And because of Clavis, he was going to become a vampire much sooner than expected.

(That old man... doing whatever he wants!)

That meant Raquel's estimate of about a year before he turned into a vampire was no longer reliable. However, his thoughts would soon be swept away by Raquel's next words, spoken with a hint of dissatisfaction.

"The influence of blood fusion... In other words, it's been adjusted so that while the vampire transformation is suppressed, you can still gain strength from the fusion. So even though the blood fusion is progressing, the vampire transformation isn't, and as this fusion continues, you will naturally become stronger."

"Wait, is that really possible...?" Naoto asked with a deflated tone, the frustration he'd felt earlier evaporating.

"Of course it is. After all, it's my father." Her straightforward reply lacked any real explanation, but it was persuasive enough. Naoto nodded, feeling a bit more serious about it.

Raquel rested her chin on her knees. Though her expression was the usual calm mask, she looked somewhat like a sulking child, perhaps upset that her father had modified the arm she had created. Naoto found this aspect of Raquel endearing. While he smiled internally, an idea came to him.

"If that's the case, maybe I could actually fight Spinner properly?"

Naoto's body was no longer that of a normal human. Perhaps the outcome would be different from when he had encountered Spinner in the school hallway a few days ago. But Raquel shook her head firmly.

"That's not going to happen." Her tone was extremely serious. "That's why we're going to fight together."

"Together?" The atmosphere became too serious for any jokes, so Naoto tightened his expression and adjusted his posture slightly in the cramped tub. Raquel's golden eyes were

fixed on him, reflecting his bewildered expression. Those eyes, like mirrors reflecting the souls of others, continued to watch him, blinking instead of nodding.

"You won't be the only one fighting. I will fight too. Otherwise... we won't win." Her calm yet sharp declaration carried an undeniable truth.

We won't win.

Naoto didn't have the confidence or foolishness to deny that statement. If Raquel said so, then it was certainly true that they couldn't defeat Spinner.

He needed to become stronger. For the sake of continuing to live as a human.

"Naoto." Raquel whispered, her voice echoing softly. She released her knees, placing her palms on the bottom of the tub, and slid closer to him.

"Y-yeah...?"

As she crossed the imaginary boundary Naoto had subconsciously set in the middle of the tub, she leaned in closer, looking up at him from a short distance and placing her hand on his chest. Her hand was warm. Her white cheeks were tinged with a soft pink, as if to show that blood flowed through her veins just like any human.

"Promise me. That you will definitely obtain the 'Azure.'" Her voice, filled with a mystical resonance, slipped from her slightly parted lips and flowed directly into Naoto's heart. Her voice, both demonic and pure as a vampire, was enigmatic, whether due to her knowledge or her ignorance.

Naoto couldn't tell if the warm air tickling his chest came from Raquel's breath or the steam from the bath.

"I... I get it. If I don't, things will get pretty messy, right? I have to get it." Unable to look away from her golden eyes, Naoto replied, determined to resist the pull. He felt something was different about her today. It wasn't like Raquel. Her gestures and voice were unusually weak and leaning.

Raquel's hand slid across Naoto's chest, clinging to his left arm, his human body.

"You are my servant. My possession, in a way. You have a duty to serve me. That's why..." She spoke with an unusual intensity, creating a humid atmosphere in the already hot bath. Naoto leaned back slightly. As if he had lost his balance at a slightly different angle, Raquel's body and nose came closer.

Right in front of Naoto, Raquel's eyes blinked. The bright gold color flowed like liquid.

"Fight for me, obtain the 'Azure' for me... and then..." Raquel's words trailed off before she could finish. Naoto didn't know if she intended to continue or not. Honestly, he didn't care anymore.

Raquel stopped talking, her lips trembling, and then she fell face-first into the bath, as if being drawn in.

She had fainted.

It was heatstroke.

—

A cool night breeze flowed in through the slightly opened window.

The night had grown late, almost approaching morning. No voices could be heard from outside.

It was quiet, almost as if time had stopped. At this hour, he would usually be in bed, wrapped up in his blankets.

Naoto fanned himself, feeling incredibly sleepy.

The fan had been distributed by a pachinko parlor near the station during the summer, but he never expected he would need it at this time of year.

Carefully avoiding overheating, the gentle breeze brushed over him as he lay weakly on the futon spread out in the tatami room, where Raquel lay. Raquel, in the pajamas he had managed to put on her, lay weakly on the futon spread out on the tatami mat, her vampire cheeks flushed red.

Frowning weakly, she complained in a thin voice, her head spinning. "Ugh... ugh, what... happened to me..."

"Yeah, yeah," Naoto murmured as he waved the fan, "I know."

In Naoto's eyes, he could see an abnormally low number hovering over Raquel's head. It was probably much lower than it had been before her bath. But with a number this low, he couldn't tell exactly how weak she was. All he knew was that this was someone with extraordinary vitality, a vampire. And yet, she had fainted from heatstroke. It was both impressive and baffling.

"Okay, okay. Just go to sleep now... please, just go to sleep..." He wanted nothing more than for her to get some rest.

The clock was approaching four. Naoto sighed. He had school tomorrow...

This town was like a maze. They must have been trying to cram as many buildings into a small area as possible. They'd created a network of narrow alleyways and lined them with buildings like walls. And yet, there were buildings and floors where fights were allowed to break out, creating holes in this orderly structure. It was incredibly inefficient and disorganized.

But this chaotic cityscape was a perfect environment for those who lurked in the shadows.

The moonlight sliced through the night sky, casting deep, bottomless shadows between the buildings.

A man walking through the shadowy alley paused at the entrance of a derelict building, its gaping mouth inviting him deeper into the abyss.

It was late at night, and everything was quiet. If he listened closely, he could hear the sound of a motorcycle roaring down the street or the laughter of young people gathered at the station plaza. But the man was not interested in such things. He climbed slowly up to the third floor of the building, as if savoring the exploration of this abandoned place.

The building had probably housed several shops and offices at one time, but now there were no signs of human activity on any floor. The third floor was no different. A large, empty space stretched out beyond a rectangular opening where a door must have once been.

The air was dusty. The windows, though cracked, were still tightly shut, preserving the stagnant air inside.

"It was a comfortable place."

A faint light from outside filtered through the window, illuminating the room.

The man who stepped into the dim light was tall and thin, with unusually long limbs. His hair, neatly combed and styled, was a gray color similar to that of weathered concrete, and his narrow eyes were a deep, murky black. A large tattoo, the meaning of which was unclear, marred his pale, thin face.

He was Spinner Superior. Existing since ancient times, he had hidden the great power of "magic" out of fear of human malice. He had broken free from the Mage's Guild and walked the noble path of his own exploration.

Carrying abundant knowledge and ambition, he stepped into the room and looked around. He soon discovered what he was looking for.

It was in the back of the room, lying against the wall. It was a giant, caterpillar-like creature with a body of a deep blue color. It had a large mouth on its head, big enough to devour itself, which it used to capture and consume its prey.

But the creature, which was at least a meter long, was now in pieces. It had been hacked to pieces with a sharp weapon, incredibly quickly. Although it had been subjected to countless blows, from a distance, the deformed creature still retained the silhouette of a caterpillar.

A great deal of bodily fluid had splattered everywhere, even reaching the ceiling. The smell that filled the room was mainly that of the creature's bodily fluid.

But... there was something else.

"A girl, was it?" Pointing a long, sharp finger at the air, Spinner tried to identify the faint remaining scent. Then, he looked down at the creature that was now being devoured.

The Apostle, who had transformed into an insect, had been killed only a short time ago. But whoever had done it was no longer nearby.

"What a beautiful cut. A bit too ornate, but full of vitality and beauty..." he murmured, as if singing to no one in particular, and knelt beside the remains of the creature. He inserted his joined index and middle fingers into one of the deepest, sharpest cuts. The sound of flesh and wet fluid was almost obscene.

"This is..."

With his finger still embedded in the creature, Spinner's narrow eyes widened. He twisted his finger, taking more flesh from the fresh cut. Droplets of bodily fluid dripped onto his palm as he took a deep sniff.

He could feel it. The aura of the one who had cut up the acidic Apostle.

Spinner smiled, his wire-thin arms and the delicate frame that supported them trembling with excitement. He couldn't contain the pressure that was swelling from within. It was as if everything was aligning perfectly with his desires.

"Oh, what fate, what destiny! I never imagined that the 'Soul Eater' would appear at such a moment... This is surely the world's desire, no, the 'Azure's' desire. The 'Azure' must be guiding me towards the truth!"

There was no longer any need to create more Apostles and hide them among the masses. Everything he needed was already gathered around him.

Spinner hurled the Apostle's flesh, which he held in his palm, toward the ceiling, as if offering heartfelt gratitude to the heavens, scattering blessings like flowers.

"I won't keep you waiting much longer, Raquel Alucard... Soon, you will be mine. I eagerly await the day I can hold your slender limbs in my arms." His voice rose with the rapture of a lovesick maiden as he spoke his love to the distant white moon high above the ceiling. "Let us begin... for the night of our union, when you will become mine." As Spinner's breath trembled, the creature, having lost its form, collapsed into a blackened mass at his feet.

Yet, the sound of the deformed creature's "*kichi kichi*" echoed through the room.

The night grew deeper. The moon in the sky gradually rounded. Soon, the moon would be a perfect circle.

Surely, its radiance would reach the twin eyes of the beautiful vampire, Raquel Alucard.

—

Under the expansive, clear autumn sky, Naoto, Raquel, and Haruka had come to the rooftop of Shinkawahama First High School. The morning classes had gone smoothly, and they had a few minutes before the afternoon classes began. In other words, it was lunchtime.

Since there were no student council meetings that morning or afternoon, they were finally able to eat lunch together after a long time.

"I got a little carried away and made a lot, so dig in!" Haruka spread out a small leisure sheet she had brought from home and opened a lavish three-tiered bento box at its center.

The contents were just as extravagant as the bento box itself. Starting with Haruka's signature tamagoyaki, chunky fried chicken, potato salad, and cherry tomatoes—regulars in the Hayami family's bento—there were also asparagus wrapped in meat, homemade pickles, stir-fried sausage and potatoes, glazed carrots, fried eggplants, and so on, all packed in with a rich variety of colors.

In addition, each of them was given an onigiri wrapped in nori seaweed: two for Naoto and one each for Raquel and Haruka.

Looking at the large onigiri and the extravagant hanami bento spread out before him, Naoto couldn't help but make a remark. He propped his chin on his hand as he sat cross-legged.

"You know this is for three people, right? There's no way we can finish all this..." Despite being a high school boy, Naoto wasn't an exceptionally big eater. Of course, neither were Haruka or Raquel.

Haruka must have realized that she had gone overboard. With a slightly embarrassed but happy smile, she said, "But if we each eat one layer, I think we'll be okay."

"If we can eat one layer," Naoto replied.

Considering Haruka and Raquel's usual eating habits, it seemed like quite a stretch. In other words, he would end up eating more than one layer. With that in mind, Naoto accepted the paper plate and chopsticks that Haruka handed him.

A small wet wipe came with it. She was too prepared. It was like a field trip.

"Here you go, Raquel-chan, a plate for you too. Oh, do you want to take something?" Haruka handed Raquel a paper plate and fork with a cheerful smile.

Until then, Raquel had been staring intently at the bento without saying a word. When she was called, she looked up in surprise.

"U-uh, um, anything is... fine, I guess."

"Okay, then I'll just grab whatever..." Haruka's serving chopsticks wandered over the bento, nimbly picking up various side dishes. Following her lead, Naoto also took some side dishes for his plate and put his hands together.

"Itadakimasu!"

The first thing Naoto chose was the tamagoyaki. Perfectly round and fluffy, it was subtly sweet. The familiar taste brought him a sense of relief.

"How is it?" Haruka leaned in with a hint of expectation as she passed a plate piled with a balanced mix of meat and vegetables to Raquel. After chewing carefully and swallowing, Naoto nodded vigorously.

"Yeah, it's delicious. Well, it's always good."

"I'm glad! Fufufu, Nao-kun is so good at complimenting people."

"What's that supposed to mean? And you're pretty cheerful today," he said, glancing at Raquel beside him.

Raquel, who was holding a piece of carrot gratin with her fork, nodded seriously. "Somehow... it feels like there are flowers blooming all around me."

Wondering why she was in such a good mood, Raquel bit into the glazed carrot. Immediately, her eyes sparkled.

Although not as obvious as Haruka, Raquel was also very easy to read in situations like this. Naoto couldn't help but smile and took a bite of his onigiri. He didn't mind the feeling of the nori seaweed stretching as he bit into the rice.

Mimicking him, Haruka took a bite of her rice ball. "Well, I haven't had breakfast or lunch together for about a week."

"But you've been eating dinner with us, right?"

A week was a bit of an exaggeration. Naoto stuffed his mouth with fried chicken, the fragrant ginger warming his stomach.

"Yeah, but... but it's been a long time since we've had breakfast and lunch together, right?"

"I guess so."

It was true. Naoto had felt a little lonely during lunches without Haruka's bento, and the mornings when Haruka didn't come to wake him up had been a rush every minute of every day.

(I need to become more independent)

This was like being a child dependent on his mother. Naoto reached for the meat-wrapped vegetables while reflecting on this.

"Hey, Nao-kun, there's something I wanted to ask you, remember?" Haruka began hesitantly, setting her plate aside and poking a small straw into her strawberry milk carton. She smiled shyly, and the pink in her cheeks deepened slightly. Naoto tilted his head, not understanding what she was talking about.

"Remember what?"

"I mean, the other day, when Saya-chan came to your house."

"Oh, right. I caused a bit of trouble then..." Before Naoto could finish his sentence, Haruka interrupted him in a flustered tone. She leaned forward, almost crushing the juice carton in her lap.

"No, it's not that! Before that! Before Saya came... um..." She trailed off. But even Naoto, dense as he was, figured out what she was trying to say.

"Ah..." He didn't know how to respond. He looked around, confused. He hadn't meant to, but he was suddenly reminded of that day. It was a cool afternoon, and they had been on the balcony with the laundry flapping in the breeze. They had kissed...

"It's my first time," Haruka had said with a smile. Remembering the look on Haruka's face, Naoto felt a pang of guilt in his chest.

He had forgotten. He had lied to Haruka that day. The kiss had probably been very important to her, her

"Y-yeah, I remember, but..." A hint of guilt made Naoto's words falter. He ended up sounding evasive. He took a sip from the café au lait pack to cover his embarrassment.

But Haruka smiled, relieved, and placed her hand on her chest. "I-I'm glad. No, it's not that. I mean, it's nothing... It's a bit lonely, but it's not like I want you to do anything about it..."

Haruka's words became tangled and she started to speak faster. Naoto couldn't keep up and opened his mouth in confusion.

Noticing his expression, Haruka closed her mouth as if coming to her senses. After taking a deep breath, she shrugged her shoulders with a shy smile. "Um... so, I just wanted to spend more time with you, Nao-kun. I'm happy that we have even a little time together like this. That's all."

"O-oh, I see," Naoto replied, feeling a little embarrassed. He scratched the back of his head with his chopsticks and took a bite of his onigiri. The taste of the pickled plum was refreshing.

"Haruka really wants to be with you, Naoto," Raquel chimed in, having been quietly listening to their conversation while diligently eating her tamagoyaki.

Haruka jumped slightly, her hand flying to her chest. "Huh? Oh, um... yeah." At first, she was flustered, but then she nodded honestly. She smiled, making Naoto even more unsure of what to do.

Haruka held the strawberry milk carton in her lap and looked up at Raquel with a serious expression. Her kind, big eyes were fixed directly on Raquel. "Of course, I want to be with Raquel-chan too. Family is supposed to be together, right? Raquel-chan is almost like family to me too." She tilted her head and smiled.

Raquel, who was just about to put a piece of tamagoyaki in her mouth, rounded her eyes and looked down, seeming perplexed.

Naoto, who had grown accustomed to Raquel's expressions, couldn't tell if she was happy or not. But Haruka seemed to take it positively. With the same cheerful expression she had when she spread out the bento, she picked up a piece of cauliflower from the pickles she had made.

(Family...)

Naoto pondered this bitter thought. For Naoto, his family was more like Haruka and Yuki than his blood-related sister. But they weren't his real siblings or mother.

His real sister was Saya. No matter what the circumstances, no matter what grudges he held.

He had lied to Haruka. The first person he had ever kissed was Saya. And it hadn't been a loving kiss. Five years ago, on the day Saya had killed his family with Soul Eater, she had forced herself on him. She had said it was the most efficient way to drain his life force.

"Right! Hey, once the culture festival is over, the student council work will settle down. Why don't we all go out somewhere together?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Naoto replied, nodding to Haruka's cheerful voice, but his mind wasn't on his friend.

Despite the beautiful weather and delicious lunch, his head was filled with troubling matters. Saya, Spinner, Apostles, and... the "Azure".

After tomorrow, classes would end early, and the entire student body would be busy preparing for the cultural festival. There was only a week left until the festival. He wanted to take care of these troublesome matters before then.

(And speaking of Saya... I haven't seen her at all since then)

Given his younger sister's diligent nature, he had expected to be pursued daily, constantly feeling her threat.

(I wonder where she is right now)

A mix of annoyance, worry, and indignation welled up in his chest, making him feel uneasy. To clear his head, Naoto took a big bite of his onigiri, including the pickled plum.

—

After school, Naoto and Raquel headed towards Shika Street near the station, leaving Haruka behind to do student council work. However, instead of turning onto their usual route to school, they walked straight towards the station. Their destination was a supermarket that Haruka often visited.

It wasn't for casual shopping to pass the time. Haruka had asked them to buy groceries for dinner since she would be working until almost the end of school due to her extra work. Even if they went to the supermarket after school hours, it would still be open until 9:30 PM, so there was plenty of time.

But since Haruka always cooked delicious meals without complaining, despite being busy, he felt he should at least do the shopping. Besides, he had a very important mission today. There was a time-limited sale on a pack of ten eggs for only 100 yen, starting at 4 PM.

Haruka had given him a shopping list with a fervent request to buy the eggs no matter what, and her determination had made Naoto flinch. She would definitely make a capable wife.

"Let's look around this area tonight," Raquel suggested, more like a statement than a question, as she looked around the street lined with stylish streetlights.

What they were searching for was Spinner's Apostles. Naoto sighed, his shoulders slumping wearily. He understood that he needed combat experience to defeat Spinner, and the thought of creatures like Apostles lurking in his familiar town made him feel uneasy. But he couldn't bring himself to clench his fist and say, "Let's do this."

Honestly, he wished he could pretend that the Apostles and Spinner didn't exist and return to the peaceful days of old.

"Speaking of which, Raquel," he turned to his side, intending to ask how many Apostles might be lurking around here, especially near the station.

But... Raquel was gone.

(No way...)

It wasn't that Raquel had disappeared. Something was happening all around Naoto.

All the sounds had ceased. The murmur of people, the sound of footsteps, even the barking of dogs on walks. There was no sound of cars, bicycles, or trains. Not even the wind.

In the unnatural silence, Naoto realized it wasn't just the sounds that were missing. Everything that made sounds was gone.

The people walking through the bustling streets had vanished. There was no one. The city was still, as if time had stopped, and an empty, hollow feeling spread around Naoto.

He had seen this before.

It was when he was going to school with Haruka that morning. Suddenly, everyone had disappeared, and when he turned around, there was a girl there.

She had golden hair tied in two pigtails, with large ribbons like rabbit ears. She looked a bit like Raquel, but she was much younger.

Recalling that memory, Naoto swallowed hard and looked behind him. The familiar scenery he had walked through was once again devoid of people. At the end of the straight path, a single figure stood still.

"Wha..."

Naoto felt a jolt of surprise at the "figure," and his breath caught in his throat. He instinctively took a step back.

The being with crimson eyes staring intently at him was not a girl with blonde hair and black ribbons... but a stunningly beautiful man with long, glossy black hair cascading down his back.

Clavis Alucard.

In this ambiguous, surreal space, where it was hard to distinguish dream from reality, he was the only one exuding an aura that felt like a blend of awe and a cutting pain.

He approached slowly, gliding towards Naoto. The distance of about five meters was closed in a single breath.

Naoto was breathless. He looked up at the man who had suddenly appeared in front of him, feeling as if he were much taller, even though their heights were not so different.

He couldn't look away. It wasn't just his gaze; every part of his consciousness was drawn in, making him feel that if he wavered even slightly, he would lose his head. Those crimson eyes naturally instilled a primal fear as they looked at Naoto and suddenly softened.

"It's been a long time, Naoto Kurogane."

The soft, sweet voice was gentle, yet it held a power that seemed to command the very air itself.

Naoto swallowed involuntarily and asked, his voice strained, "Why... are you here...?"

It was absurd. He didn't even understand where he was, or whether this was reality or not, yet he couldn't judge whether it was unnatural for Clavis to appear here. Rather, it was Naoto who was being left behind in the situation.

Clavis narrowed his terrifyingly beautiful eyes and deepened his smile. "You speak as if you know where 'here' is."

"Well, it happened before. Something similar, where everyone disappeared. But it wasn't you I saw then."

Clavis's tone didn't seem particularly responsive, yet Naoto felt a chill deep in his gut and began to string together words of explanation.

As he spoke, he realized something. The previous encounter, when he had entered a dreamlike state where time seemed to pause, had only lasted a few seconds. He hadn't been able to move his body as he wanted, and he hadn't been able to ask the girl who appeared who she was.

But now it was different. Though the reality felt distant, the fear he felt towards Clavis was all too close, and he could speak freely.

"Hmm... So there is someone else who has intervened with you," Clavis mused, bringing his porcelain-white fingers to his lips.

It was a shame that he had involuntarily stiffened at such a small gesture. Trying to forget his obvious reaction, Naoto pretended to be calm and asked, "Intervened?"

To Naoto's question, Clavis replied in a sweet voice, "Phenomenon Intervention."

It was a word he had never heard before. The strange sound gave Naoto a slight dizziness. Perhaps it wasn't a word he was supposed to know. For some reason, he felt that way, and he pressed his temples.

For Clavis, however, it seemed to be a perfectly ordinary word, as he needed a few seconds to think before explaining it verbally.

"It refers to the 'Azure's' power to manipulate the possibilities that could arise by interfering with the flow of time. However, I lack the power to trigger Phenomenon Intervention. This is just a poor imitation. I can only stop the flow of time; I cannot interfere with the possibilities."

"So... you're stopping time?"

"Yes, that's right." His gaze, which had momentarily drifted away, returned to Naoto. Just that was enough to make Naoto...

Naoto had to swallow hard to keep from choking. He swallowed the tightness in his chest along with the stale air and shook his head.

"For someone like me, just being able to stop time is impressive enough... It's kind of god-like, isn't it?" he said, a bit sarcastically. After he said it, he wondered if that sounded a bit sarcastic, but Naoto didn't feel like retracting his words. There were beings that could manipulate time and possibilities.

Borrowing a phrase from Kihiro, it was a "threat." Despite such manipulations, ordinary people like him remained ignorant and vulnerable to being toyed with by "someone."

With his brow furrowed in irritation rather than confusion, Naoto watched as Clavis shrugged and chuckled.

"That's quite a cynical view. As you say, it is the work of someone who is not human," Clavis said.

Although Clavis's smile seemed bright, Naoto felt a sense of dread creep down his spine. Perhaps it was because of the crimson eyes that peered at him from behind his long, doll-like hair, still curved in a smile.

Maintaining his smile, Clavis continued in a gentle yet unsettling tone, as if he were holding Naoto's heart in his hand. "You don't need to understand the rules of the outside world. And you certainly don't need to worry about this barren place where time is simply suspended, devoid of any possibilities. This is merely a means to an end. It's not my goal."

Naoto furrowed his brow, puzzled. "Do you want something from me...?"

"I wanted to have a leisurely chat with you. In a place where no one can disturb us," Clavis's lips twisted into a wry smile.

By "disturb," he probably meant the Mitsurugi Agency. With Clavis appearing in this city, Kihiro and the organization would be frantically searching for him. There was also the possibility that this included Raquel. Naoto felt a nagging sense of unease at being invited into this "barren place" while ignoring Raquel.

"What do you want to talk about?" Naoto asked, his voice tense. It was unhealthy for him to be alone with this incredibly beautiful and intimidating vampire. But at the same time, he was very curious about why Clavis wanted to talk to him so much.

The crimson eyes slowly scanned Naoto's entire body, painting him in a pool of blood-red color.

"I want to know why Raquel chose you," Clavis said.

Naoto made a small sound in his throat. "Chose" was the word Clavis used, both now and before.

"How would I know that?" Naoto shook his head, his face contorted in confusion. "You should ask her that."

"If that were possible, parents in this world could live a little more easily."

"Wh-what...?" Naoto was speechless. He hadn't expected such a domestic statement from this man. "I don't know... It's not that I was chosen. It's more like I was rescued by Raquel by accident."

"I see... Well, then, let me rephrase my question. Naoto, what do you intend to do with the 'Azure'?"

The moment Naoto was called by his name, he flinched involuntarily. It felt like his heart was being squeezed in a vise, and now someone was lightly scratching at it. But he couldn't cower like this forever. Naoto took a deep breath and looked straight at Clavis.

"Of course, I want to return to being human and have a normal life," he said.

In less than a year, Naoto would become a vampire and lose his self and reason. He had to return to normal before then. A completely ordinary human. He would use the "Azure" or anything else to achieve that. And if he could erase Saya's annoying Drive, that would be even better.

"As I said before... if you wish, I will take appropriate measures to prevent you from becoming a vampire. I promise to fulfill your wish to return to being human if I obtain the 'Azure'."

"So, you want me to get Raquel to back off?" Naoto retorted reflexively. His tone turned somewhat aggressive without him realizing it.

As if in a flashback, Naoto remembered the first time Clavis had appeared. Raquel, who was usually arrogant and condescending, had cowered. Yet she had said that they would obtain the "Azure".

"Do you not trust me?" Clavis asked with a cold smile. It was just a whisper, but it felt like a sharp blade to the throat.

Clenching his fist to steady himself, Naoto replied firmly, "It's not that. It's just that I trust Raquel more than you."

"I see," Clavis smiled. It was the smile of someone who wasn't human, a smile that didn't reveal what he was thinking.

"Can I ask you something?" Naoto asked, challenging him. Clavis extended his hand, as if to offer a truce.

"Go ahead."

"You..." Naoto hesitated for a few seconds, unsure of what to say. He couldn't think of the right words. He roughly scratched his head and gave up trying to find the right words. "I heard it from

someone at the Mitsurugi Agency. You... you're the one from the mass disappearance incident, right? They say you made a huge number of people vanish all over the world. Is that true?"

"Yes, it is." Clavis replied without hesitation or doubt.

"Wha-" It was a surprisingly straightforward confirmation, devoid of hesitation or doubt. Naoto was taken aback and took half a step back. He wasn't expecting a denial. Nor did he want an apology or confession. But the answer that slipped out was far too casual.

—

Before Naoto could ask why, Clavis, with his usual calm yet ominous voice, interrupted.

"Do you want to know what happened?" Naoto nodded eagerly.

In that instant, the surrounding scenery shifted as if curtains were being drawn. Naoto looked around in confusion. The bustling evening streets were gone, replaced by a dimly lit, gloomy atmosphere. The buildings, once crowded together with bright signs and logos, now looked like abandoned ruins.

The place looked familiar. It was an abandoned apartment complex.

In the deserted twilight of the complex, Naoto stood facing Clavis on a winding promenade.

"I have been fighting for some time to eliminate a certain Drive." Although the sky was still bright with evening light, the housing complex seemed to have welcomed twilight earlier than the rest, cast in a faint, eerie darkness. Against this unsettling backdrop, Clavis gazed around with a nostalgic look in his blood-red eyes.

"Five years ago, I fought someone with the Drive in question here. But it wasn't easy. Many people were sacrificed. The number of people I sacrificed to eliminate that single Drive user must have exceeded one hundred thousand."

One hundred twenty-eight thousand nine hundred thirty-two.

Naoto recalled it as if it had fallen from the sky. That was the number of people who disappeared in the "mass disappearance incident" that Kiirō had mentioned, caused by Clavis.

Clavis turned his gaze back to Naoto and continued.

"The name of the Drive I was chasing was... 'Soul Eater'. You already know what that is, don't you?"

Naoto felt as if his heart had been seized. He held his breath, staring in disbelief at what he heard. But there was no doubt—he had heard it. Soul Eater.

He couldn't count how many times he'd heard that name in the past few days. It was the power that had taken his family away five years ago, a power he had been unaware of until recently. And it was the Drive that his sister, Saya, possessed.

"That's when I happened upon this." Suddenly, Clavis's tone shifted slightly, as if the wind had changed.

(Has it become more colorful...?)

It was a subtle change, too subtle to be certain, but it left a distinct impression, and Clavis held out his white hand towards Naoto, palm up.

In his hand, as if inviting him to dance, was a blue sphere. It was a bit too large to be held in a fist. Yet, it was the size of a marble, smooth and without a scratch. It was flawless, clear, and yet seemed to flicker faintly like a flame.

"Do you know what this is?" Clavis asked, implying that Naoto should know. The sphere in Clavis's palm glowed faintly. It was a dull, blue glow, as if ink had been dropped into water. A black blotch formed at the top of the sphere. It was like a few drops of ink had been dropped into water.

The smudged black gradually took shape. It was a symbol, and for Naoto, it was a number. It was the number that always appeared above people's heads, representing their life force. A vast eight-digit number floated above the blue sphere.

"This is..." Naoto knew that number. After all, he had just seen it next to him a moment ago. Naoto looked up at Clavis, his eyes wide with confusion. He didn't know how to interpret what he had seen and understood.

Clavis nodded slowly, as if reassuring him.

"Yes. This is Raquel."

"B-but this is!"

It was just a sphere. It didn't have her bright golden hair or her innocent golden eyes.

Clavis nodded heavily, as if confirming.

"To be more precise, I should say this is something that will eventually take the form of Raquel... This is the result of the countless lives I sacrificed. It has come together to form a blue crystal - an 'Embryo'."

Embryo, a term referring to a developing organism before it becomes a fetus.

"And this is also the key to the Azure."

"The key to the Azure?"

In other words, it was necessary to reach the Azure. Naoto stared at the blue sphere in Clavis's hand, as if drawn to it.

This is Raquel.

Does this mean that Raquel was created from this little sphere? From more than 120,000 lost lives? Naoto couldn't understand it. He could only accept Clavis' words as they were and memorize them.

Clavis sighed softly, like velvet rubbing against velvet. His expression softened as he exhaled, a faint smile appearing.

"That key to the Azure, Raquel, has chosen 'Naoto Kurogane' as a partner in the pursuit of the Azure. Moreover, your sister happens to be a Drive user of that powerful Soul Eater. I think it's only natural that I would take a special interest in you," he said, and Naoto felt a chill run down his spine at the smile.

Thinking back, it might have been obvious all along. But Clavis knew—he knew about Naoto's sister Saya and the Soul Eater she possessed, which he had presumably defeated at a great cost. Though it wasn't stated outright, he probably also knew that Saya had appeared before Naoto.

(I take it back... I can't trust Clavis Alucard.)

What he knew was different. What he saw was different. The place he stood was different. The sense of superiority he felt towards Raquel was on a different level. It was higher, farther away, and it felt strangely out of sync. Trusting him wholeheartedly would mean submitting to his transcendence.

"Why does someone as powerful as you want the 'Azure'? You can do anything without it, can't you?" Naoto asked his question naturally.

He had said it earlier. Clavis had said that he could somehow undo Naoto's transformation into a vampire, something that Raquel couldn't do without the Azure. Whether that "somehow" would be in a way that Naoto desired was another matter entirely.

Clavis gently closed his hand around the blue sphere. Was it a chicken? When his white fingers opened again, the mysterious sphere was gone. With a calm gaze, Clavis looked at his empty hand.

"There are countless things I cannot do. I want to return the world to the hands of humans. For that, I need the Azure." Once again, his red gaze slid back to Naoto, as if to pin him down like an insect. Avoiding the sharp pin, Naoto turned his eyes to Clavis's beautiful hands, whose beauty seemed unbecoming for a man.

"I don't really get it. What do you mean by returning to human hands?"

"It's exactly what it sounds like... Naoto Kurogane, what do you think of me?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" After a pause, Naoto turned to Clavis, who asked to change the subject, with a look of confusion on his face.

Honestly, he would say 'monster'. But was it appropriate to say that to his face?

As if seeing through Naoto's hesitation, Clavis chuckled.

"You can say whatever you want. To put it simply, I am a 'monster.'"

Ignoring Naoto's apprehension, Clavis himself said the words Naoto had tried to avoid. Naoto couldn't help but frown. Imagining how it felt for someone to call himself a monster filled him with a deep sense of loneliness. Yet Clavis continued without changing his expression.

"Beings that are not human... That's what Drives create. It's a power that exceeds what a person should have. Monsters are unnecessary in this world. That's why I want to erase monsters... and the Drives that cause them from this world."

"Erase Drives? Wait, but that means..." Naoto hesitated, biting his lip. He remembered Raquel's words. Clavis, born from the Azure, was a Drive himself. If Clavis wanted to "erase Drives from this world"...

Clavis quickly answered the question that was weighing on Naoto's mind.

"Listen, Naoto. There shouldn't be monsters like me. They shouldn't exist. I intend to obtain the 'Azure' to erase 'myself' and everything like me."

In other words, to erase himself along with all Drives.

Understanding the meaning, Naoto didn't know what to say. He felt a bit confused. What exactly was the 'Azure'? He pondered this in the back of his mind. He had heard it was the power that made all possibilities possible.

Naoto wanted to use it to live as a human. On the other hand, Clavis, who sought the same thing, wanted to use it to die as a monster.

"...It's almost time." Suddenly looking up at the void, Clavis murmured in a slightly troubled tone. Narrowing his crimson eyes, he ran his fingers through his beautiful, glossy black hair before turning back to Naoto. "Naoto Kurogane, let me give you one last piece of advice. If you continue to seek the Azure, you will cease to be yourself. You will suffer more than you do now. Even so... will you seek the Azure?"

It felt like a threat, yet it wasn't. It was just a question, as if questioning his resolve.

Naoto couldn't see his true intentions. He buried his hand in his hair, messing it up, and responded cautiously.

"...Even if I don't, I'm going to become a vampire, right?" If he lost his sense of self, he might attack the people around him. He might kill the people he cared about.

He couldn't imagine what kind of suffering could be worse than that.

Naoto lifted his chin, answering firmly with a glare.

"Then it's the same either way. Besides, I promised Raquel. I will get the Azure..."

Raquel is probably doubling down on that promise.

Clavis smiled, a blend of amusement and something darker.

"Would you still seek the Azure even if it meant fighting me?" The vampire casually spoke, his words threatening.

Naoto's expression twisted.

"W-Well, if it comes to that, I hope you'll go easy on me," he stammered. Even now, facing Spinner, Raquel had told him he had no chance of winning. There was no way he could face Clavis head-on.

Clavis burst out laughing, revealing the most cheerful smile he had ever seen.

"I can show mercy. I promise to end it before you suffer."

Was he joking, or was he serious?

What was certain was that those words, tossed out in jest, pierced Naoto's heart with fear. It would be effortless. With just a flick of those white fingertips, he could end Naoto's life as many times as he wanted.

"Ha... are you serious...?" Naoto wanted to slap himself for having the courage to say that much. He realized too late that he had stepped into forbidden territory. A feeling of unease gnawed at his stomach. But in an instant, Naoto was released from both that unease and the beautiful terror smiling before him.

"...To. Naoto? Are you even listening to me?"

"Huh...? W-What?" Startled by the reprimanding voice that came from beside him and slightly below, Naoto, flustered, took several steps back. The bustling crowd surged around him, overwhelming his thoughts. Voices from all directions flooded in, the air shifting.

Beside Naoto stood Raquel, looking concerned. Her sharp, captivating eyes fixated on him, glaring intently.

"Finally, you've looked at me. You've been so lost in thought since a while ago... Are you really serious about your training?"

"Training...?" It took a moment for his slow mind to understand that she was referring to exterminating Spinner's apostles. "Oh, yeah, of course," Naoto managed to squeeze out, his throat dry. He unconsciously put his hand to his forehead.

(Another... dream?)

But it didn't seem to be the case. Naoto quickly pulled his hand away to look closely.

Something was off. It wasn't just his palm; there was cold sweat beading where he had touched his forehead.

(Was I that scared?)

The memories weren't vague like those after waking from a dream. They were clear. He remembered the exact distance between him and Clavis, and what they had talked about, whether it was in the deserted city or the empty apartment complex. What he had been told.

"Hey Raquel. Looks like he's going to finish me off before I have a chance to suffer too much. That's kind of a relief." Naoto chuckled wryly, but Raquel seemed to get even more irritated. She tugged hard on his sleeve.

"What nonsense are you talking about? Honestly, what trivial thoughts have been filling your head? I can't believe your mind is capable of ignoring my words."

"... Why are you so angry?"

For once, Raquel was expressing her emotions openly. No, it wasn't so much anger as it was frustration. A simmering resentment at Naoto for not listening to her. But Naoto was puzzled.

She had made sarcastic comments before, but had she ever conveyed her emotions so clearly? Of course, compared to the girls in their class, her anger was more restrained, but it was still a surprisingly expressive display for Raquel.

"I'm not angry at all." She said, turning away and sulking.

"You are, clearly," he retorted.

"I told you I'm not!" she insisted, even more stubbornly.

Naoto couldn't help but chuckle. Was she acting like a child? He wondered if Clavis had ever seen this kind of expression from her.

"Okay, okay, my bad." If he kept laughing, he would just make Raquel angrier. Trying to suppress the laughter welling up inside him, Naoto raised his hands in surrender. At that, Raquel's expression suddenly changed. The anger that had been there a moment ago disappeared as if it had never existed, replaced by a dazed look as she looked up at Naoto. Naoto tilted his head, wondering what was going on.

At that moment, Raquel saw something. She saw the shadow of another man behind Naoto. It was a shadow, a hazy memory. But it was the presence of someone "Raquel" shouldn't have known.

It was like a scene from the distant past, or a view of the distant future. It was vague and indistinct, but strangely, it moved Raquel's heart. She felt a strange affection. For that awkward expression, the way he twisted his mouth into a smile as he looked at her.

"Hey, Raquel..."

Was Raquel experiencing some kind of phenomenon interference? Thinking that as a half-hearted joke, Naoto started to speak, but Raquel suddenly turned around, snapping out of her trance.

"This is..." In an instant, the atmosphere around Raquel changed. It was a sharp, needle-like wariness. After a few moments, Raquel said softly, "I can feel the strong... power of the Azure."

Startled, Naoto scanned his surroundings. All he could see was the ordinary sight of a bustling city. But he knew that beneath it, in the shadows, the seeds of danger had already been sown.

"You mean a Drive, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

Was it Spinner? Or Saya? Or someone else?

"Let's go..." Grabbing his bag tightly with sweaty hands, Naoto said in a low voice. Raquel nodded, her attention focused, and ran towards a path that led to the other side of the station. Naoto hurried to follow her.

The sun was still hanging low in the western sky. It was still too early for the e-wave. But little by little, the town was approaching the time of nightfall.

Chapter 10: Encounter

It was still a little early in the evening. The western sky was dyed in the colors of dusk, but the eastern sky still retained the colors of an afternoon that could be called day.

It was a time when many people were out and about in the city. But here, it is just the other side of a disconnected world.

A large, hollow sound echoed from the construction site of a new building, where materials covered with blue tarps were piled up here and there, surrounded by thin walls.

The hard, flat, leveled ground kicked up a low cloud of dust. The ground, which had been meticulously prepared, was now sunken in the center, as if to undo the work done by human hands the previous week when construction had stopped. From this source, numerous shallow cracks ran in all directions.

At the center of the cracks stood a man. Tall and broad, his silhouette, illuminated by the wishful moonlight, resembled that of a giant beast. His roughly styled hair, which had been swept back and pinned down, looked almost like a "1."

But he was in human form, at least for now.

"...Boring." He muttered in a low growl, his voice muffled by his tight suit. Valkenhayn Helsing withdrew the foot he had just slammed into the ground. Underneath it was a crushed insect about the size of a human baby. Its rounded back was covered in thick, hard skin, and beneath it were scissor-like jaws and sickle-like claws. But the strange insect was no longer moving.

The armor on its back, its pride and joy, had been shattered, and one of its sickle-like claws was missing. It had leaped at Valkenhayn, been grabbed, slammed into the ground, and then stomped on with all his might. Just that was enough to make the bug cease functioning.

"Why do we have to be sent out to exterminate insects? Searching for insects and crushing them, searching for insects and crushing them... I didn't come to this country to do such boring chores!" Ignoring the bug's bodily fluids that splattered on his shoe, Valkenhayn looked up and let out a furious shout toward his target.

His target was a slender young man standing with his arms crossed against the wall of the construction site. Like Valkenhayn, he was wearing a suit, but the purple cloak he wore over it was an eye-catching contrast. Furthermore, a black leather band concealed both of his eyes beneath his thin golden bangs, giving him an even more bizarre appearance.

This was Relius Clover. Compared to the robust Valkenhayn, his physique was ordinary, and if he removed his unusual attire, he could blend into the everyday scenery without a problem. But in an emotionless voice that conveyed none of that calm scenery, Relius responded coldly.

"I've already been paid. It's a job."

"That again! Does your so-called great research really cost that much?!" With no interest left, Valkenhayn stepped over the bug's corpse and strode towards Relius. In an attempt to extinguish his burning frustration, Relius remained unmoved as he responded.

"It does."

The way he said it, without any hesitation or even a hint of feeling the need to justify himself, left Valkenhayn speechless, more out of astonishment than anger. It was almost ridiculous to even reply.

Coolly ignoring Valkenhayn's condescending glare, Relius pulled his cell phone from his suit pocket and contacted the Mitsurugi Agency. He informed them that the extermination of the bugs was complete and that they should come to collect the corpses if needed, then abruptly hung up.

"...The creation of a perfect doll'... was it?" Valkenhayn glanced at Relius's phone as if it were something detestable and spat out the words. It was the 'goal' that Relius had been talking about for some time. He needed money for his research. That's why he was cooperating with the Mitsurugi Agency. And through the work assigned to him by the Mitsurugi Agency, he was looking for 'strong souls' needed for his research.

Valkenhayn was cooperating with the Mitsurugi Agency and killing immortals because he sought stronger enemies.

Strong beings. In that regard, their goals aligned. But it was not as if they respected each other's purposes or philosophies.

"A research that requires pouring money and souls into it can't possibly be a legitimate one!" Valkenhayn's words were laced with disdain.

Having grown accustomed to such remarks, Relius didn't even bother to throw a concealed glance back. He walked past his sturdy partner, heading toward the corpse of the crushed bug.

"More importantly, Valkenhayn, about the Apostle's corpse we saw earlier..." Relius looked down at the almost lifeless, crushed bug with apparent disinterest. This was the second time that night he had looked down at a bug's corpse. However, the first one had not been something they had slain.

Valkenhayn crossed his powerful arms over his thick chest.

"...Yes. There's no doubt about it. There are others hunting Spinner's Apostles besides us."

The grotesque Apostles usually prefer to remain unseen. They lurk in the shadows, moving in the darkness where no human can see them, suddenly reaching out from the darkness.

Therefore, ordinary people walking through the brightly lit downtown area would never be able to find them. Even if they did, they would probably die the next moment. In other words, someone who cannot be considered an ordinary person was exterminating the bugs separately from Valkenhayn and the others.

"They're quite enthusiastic about it, aren't they?" Rellius muttered to himself in a monotone. Just yesterday and the day before, he and Valkenhayn had discovered corpses of Apostles they hadn't killed. Both were likely the work of the same person. They featured slashes that were remarkably sharp and persistent.

"...Interesting."

Who could be the wielder of those slashing attacks that tore apart the Apostles? Without moving his gaze from the brutally destroyed corpse at his feet, Relius lightly rested his clenched hand against his chin.

"How's Kiiro?" Rellius answered without looking back at the bored Valkenhayn.

"She's in the middle of adjustments."

"Adjustments? What are you adjusting...?"

Before Valkenhayn could finish his question, a sharp slicing sound cut through the air. Both of them gasped, but Valkenhayn reacted faster. He kicked the ground hard enough to kick up dust and jumped aside, just as a small figure dove in.

With a flutter, like petals in the wind, a pale pink figure danced into sight.

"Relius!" With a yell of warning, sparks flew right in front of Relius. A dull sound came from the white artificial arm that appeared under Rellius's cloak and caught the hard metal.

What was caught was an attack.

It was a slash from a Japanese sword, which gleamed ominously under the brightness of the still-setting sun.

".....Daughter?" Staring at the attacker up close, Relius muttered suspiciously.

The one who jumped in was a girl. Still a child. With black hair tied up like bird feathers, her small frame was clad in a kimono of pale pink and light purple. In her white hand, the girl wielded a katana—an impressive sword that seemed far too heavy for her small stature—and she quickly sheathed it back at her waist.

Suddenly leaping into the scene was Saya Terumi.

Her sharp, clear red eyes glinted coldly as she crouched low and swiftly created some distance.

"Valkenhayn Hellsing?"

Saya, Relius, and Valkenhayn now stood at equal distances from each other, unexpectedly separated. Saya looked back and forth between the man whose eyes were covered with a black belt and the tall, sturdy man. Her voice, still tinged with childish innocence, was strangely cold for someone in her early teens. Both Relius and Valkenhayn could sense a chilling aura devoid of warmth.

"Do you know her?" Relius asked, looking at Valkenhayn. Valkenhayn furrowed his thick eyebrows, staring intently at the kimono-clad girl who had barged in.

"No, I don't."

"But it seems she has business with you." Assuming he was no longer involved, Relius calmly crossed between Valkenhayn and Saya, moving to the edge of the construction site. As Relius retreated as if to take a spectator's seat, Valkenhayn naturally found himself face to face with Saya.

"What do you want, little girl?" Valkenhayn asked the unknown girl with an intimidating weight. He wrinkled his high, bony nose. There was an unpleasant smell coming from her. An ominous scent. Even without a keen sense of smell, anyone who would boldly enter while wielding a sword could not be considered a gentle creature.

Saya straightened her back and stared at the man standing in front of her. There was no fear or hesitation in her eyes. Instead, there was a sense of exhilaration, as if she had finally found what she was looking for, and a cold, focused determination to target her prey.

Her eyes were not those of an ordinary girl. Valkenhayn's stern expression grew wary.

"...Valkenhayn Hellsing." Saya's lips once again spoke the name of her target. The moment Valkenhayn tried to respond, the distance between them shrank to almost zero.

It was unclear when or how she had kicked off the ground. But Saya, without a moment's pause, advanced to the front of the sturdy big man and spun her body in mid-air.

She had the lightness of flower petals dancing in the spring breeze. Yet she was as swift as spring thunder.

Her sword drew faster than her breath. The delicate hands of the girl, as if arranging flowers, gripped the hilt tightly, and she slashed upward from a diagonal angle with the speed of wind sweeping across the fields.

"Ugh...!" Valkenhayn arched his back and jumped back forcefully. He twisted his body almost forcefully, planting one hand on the ground to jump away. The blade grazed past his shoulder, cutting into him. It hadn't reached the flesh, but the thin fabric was slightly torn, and Valkenhayn was in pain. His eyes widened in astonishment more than in pain.

"How... fast!" From a distant spectator's seat, Relius voiced admiration.

Given Valkenhayn's robust physique and rough demeanor, one might expect him to rely on brute strength in battle. However, his true strength lies in his speed. That there exists a human capable of moving at a speed that even he cannot perceive—especially a human girl—is astonishing.

"That bug is my prey. I would appreciate it if you would stay out of this." With a steady posture, Saya returned her sword to its sheath and sent a cold warning. Her unwavering gaze suggested that she would cut anyone who didn't listen. She was clearly an extremist.

Valkenhayn raised an eyebrow in displeasure.

"If you don't want me to interfere, you should take care of it before we do. If you have time to attack us for no good reason, why don't you just go exterminate some bugs somewhere else!"

"No. I'm not aiming for your neck just for the sake of killing a bug. Valkenhayn Hellsing. Your crime is..."

The cold atmosphere around Saya suddenly began to heat up. Like icicles smoldering from within and eventually bursting into flames, Saya was filled with rage and killing intent.

"For killing my older brother!"

In the blink of an eye, Saya moved behind Valkenhayn. She skidded to a halt, tracing a half-circle with her foot, then spun on the spot to draw her sword in a fluid motion. The sound of the blade unsheathing was crisp and cool. An icy coldness crawled up his neck, and Valkenhayn kicked off the ground before he could think.

In his human form, he wouldn't make it in time. Driven by a primal instinct akin to that of a beast, he transformed into a wolf. As he leaped higher than the slash aimed at him, he kicked off the

air, performing a somersault and landing on the opposite side of the ground littered with insect corpses.

Even so, Saya's sword grazed his fur, scattering it into the air.

"This... is quite the soul." Relius stepped forward, suddenly interested. He wanted to test the girl's true worth for himself. But Valkenhayn's angry voice interrupted his second step.

"Don't touch her! I'll do it!" Transforming back from wolf to human form, Valkenhayn finally readied himself for battle. He tore off his formal tie and discarded it, loosening the collar of his shirt.

"I don't know anything about your brother, but I'll make you regret attacking me recklessly!"

".....As expected." Relius had expected that response. He shrugged his shoulders and took a step back.

Valkenhayn bared his sharp, canine teeth, his eyes gleaming with the desire to fight. He no longer thought of the girl as just a young opponent. To Valkenhayn, that girl was now an enemy. Moreover, she was an enemy that had forced him to transform so quickly.

Valkenhayn resented being forced to transform. It wasn't that he disliked his wolf form; he simply didn't want to have to rely on the transformation to amplify his already considerable physical abilities.

He didn't like being so easily cornered in this situation.

And it very simply ignited his fighting spirit.

"Don't kill her. I want to examine that girl." Though he said that, he wondered how much he could truly expect. In front of the watching Relius, Valkenhayn and Saya moved almost simultaneously.

—

Saya was still faster at closing the distance. She moved with a speed as if she were teleporting. She dashed past Valkenhayn's side in an instant. But if you knew she was fast, there was a corresponding way to deal with her. Drawing her sword with the intent to sever his head, Valkenhayn twisted his body before he could even see her. Not to dodge, but to deliver a powerful kick.

For a moment, Saya's eyes widened slightly in alarm. It seemed she hadn't anticipated the attack, given the speed and reaction time required. Holding the sheathed sword vertically, Saya narrowly deflected the beastkin's lightning-fast strike.

"Ugh...!" Her small body couldn't fully absorb the impact and was flung back. However, she managed to maintain her balance. Landing in a low stance, she quickly raised her head and charged forward again with blinding speed.

Valkenhayn was caught off guard again.

"Just a small fry!"

Roaring, Valkenhayn jumped sideways to avoid the approaching white figure. As he was about to jump, the sword still in its sheath swept his supporting leg.

"What...?"

As Valkenhayn was flustered, she aimed a blow at his head with the hilt. Saya aimed for his temple. But it couldn't beat Valkenhayn's reaction. A makeshift club that he had swung up at the last moment deflected Saya's sword.

It wasn't just Saya whose arm was thrown high. Valkenhayn, who had swung his own arm, was also off balance. A small palm from the girl struck into the exposed side of his tightened waist. A muffled voice escaped from Valkenhayn's mouth.

The palm strike to his side was so powerful that it felt beyond what a girl could deliver, as if the nails were sinking in, about to carve out flesh.

Grabbing the wrist that had struck him, Valkenhayn reached out for Saya's neck. However, with some agile movement, Saya slipped away from his grasp like a prey evading the fangs of a predator, stepping back lightly.

It felt like he was being toyed with. Unpleasantly, Valkenhayn dashed toward the girl, who was waving her sleeves annoyingly, and struck her with a fierce punch. Saya narrowly dodged the upward thrust aimed at her torso. In quick succession, Valkenhayn's foot roared as it smashed through a pile of stacked materials in one blow.

But Saya couldn't be caught.

With just a few millimeters left and a split second of difference in speed, the girl slid down to the ground.

"Damn you..."

It was rare to experience such frustrating combat. Valkenhayn's expression grew increasingly grum, feeling as if he were battling an elusive phantom. But his opponent was no illusion. She was a flesh-and-blood human. That was what made her so irritating.

Saya mockingly tilted her head, as if to say he was slow. Her small gestures stirred Valkenhayn's blood. Transforming back into a wolf, he lunged at the impudent little girl.

Kicking off the ground with his front legs, Valkenhayn closed in on Saya with a speed incomparable to his human form. Gasping, Saya thrust her sword into the jaws of the beast. Valkenhayn's fangs bit into the sheath with enough force that they almost snapped the blade. He then shook his head violently, tossing the girl effortlessly into the neighboring lot.

Next to her stood an old, gray building. Saya, blown away along with the white covering from the construction site, managed to leap in the air just before crashing into the filthy wall. Saya looked up, her long hair swinging wildly. At that moment, a massive wolf lunged at her.

Leaping with the speed it had gained from running on all fours, it transformed back into the strong young man mid-air. With that momentum, he swung his arm down.

Like a crusher breaking concrete, Valkenhayn's fist shattered the wall of the building, sending gray dust swirling into the air.

Valkenhayn clicked his tongue loudly in the curtain of dust that obscured his vision. He had missed her.

Saya kicked off the wall, jumped up, smashed through the glass, and escaped into the second floor of the building. Valkenhayn caught sight of her out of the corner of his eye, growled low, and leapt to the second floor window, determined not to let her escape.

The broken glass pointed its sharp edge inward, but he didn't care. He smashed through it and entered the building. It must have been some kind of store. It was a dark, dusty, empty floor with several empty steel shelves left in disarray. There were no signs that anyone had been there for a long time. Valkenhayn stepped onto the thin layer of dust.

And at that moment, a sharp sound cut through the air from the wall. There was no hesitation in the slash. To kill. Aiming for the neck. To slash it diagonally in a thick stroke.

Driven by a chilling fear that ran through him, Valkenhayn threw himself to the ground and rolled across the dusty bags. Fortunately, the part of his body that had been struck still had its head attached. But he hadn't been able to dodge completely. The blade had grazed his shoulder and cut into his flesh, leaving a vivid sensation and a shallow cut.

"Hmm... this is interesting." Relius voiced his intrigue as he came upstairs, using the wall and the doll's arm as a staircase. "I'm becoming more and more curious."

"Shut up! Don't butt in!" Valkenhayn yelled roughly, touching his wounded shoulder and smearing his palm in reddish-black blood. He didn't like getting cut. But Relius continued without a care as he moved to his new audience seat, a corner of the floor.

"Don't get restless. It's about time, anyway." The word "time" elicited a reaction not from Valkenahayn, but from Saya. She swung the unsheathed sword, wiping the blood from its tip, and rubbed her feet on the floor to measure the distance. It was a cautious movement unlike any she had made before.

The small, deadly blade was wary. As Relius's words had indicated, she was wary of "time".

"Little girl... how much longer can you move?" Perhaps she has temporarily enhanced her physical abilities with some kind of magic. Valkenahayn, who had felt a persistent sense of discomfort during their exchange, asked in a low voice.

Instead of answering, Saya sheathed her sword, stepping back into a stance with her hands on the hilt. It wasn't a sign of surrender; it was the opposite.

"I don't know what kind of spell it is, but you were the one who attacked first. Don't expect mercy now!"

If that was her intention, then there was no need to hold back. Valkenahayn dashed across the narrowed battlefield. He stepped in forcefully and struck with his fist, grazing a soft fabric—it was the sleeve of Saya's kimono. Next, he unleashed a horizontal roundhouse kick. Using his lowered leg as a pivot, he arced his long leg downwards from a high position.

Each blow was strong enough to kill an ordinary man, yet they were terrifyingly fast. But Saya ducked, or parried with her scabbard, and slipped away. She was still too fast. He couldn't catch her.

Though he grazed her toes, Valkenahayn's flurry of strikes failed to land a solid hit. However, during one of his many upward kicks, Saya was caught.

"Ugh..."

Saya was unable to evade in time and had to catch it with her upraised arm. It wasn't so much a defense as she was slammed into the wall behind her. A faint crack ran through the gray wall that caught her. In the center of that crack, Saya was lightly embedded in the wall, resembling a butterfly caught in a spider's web.

Valkenahayn quickly closed the distance.

"I won't kill you. But you won't be moving for a while." Leaping out in front of Saya, Valkenahayn said in an angry voice and thrust out his fist with tremendous speed.

"Wh-what!?" The next moment, Valkenahayn's eyes widened in surprise.

What his swung fist shattered was not the girl's consciousness, but the cold wall that had spiderweb-like cracks running through it. The surface, already weakened from the first strike, crumbled under Valkenhayn's second punch, engulfing his fist halfway up his arm. Beneath the embedded arm, there was a hint of a smile.

"Oh... good. You finally stopped." In a childish yet strangely eerie voice, Saya whispered from between the wall and Valkenhayn.

Saya, who seemed unable to escape from the wall she was slammed into, slipped and crouched low just before Valkenhayn's fist touched her.

"You, still...!" Thinking she was still going to fight, Valkenhayn tried to pull his arm out of the wall. But faster than that, Saya stood up.

The sword was not in her hand. She had left the sheathed sword at her feet, and Saya smoothly wrapped her unarmed hands around Valkenhayn's arm.

And then.

"Wh-what the...!?"

Suddenly, Valkenhayn's knees buckled and he collapsed.

A severe dizziness made him lose his balance and his legs trembled. As if to help Valkenhayn, who was barely able to support himself, Saya held onto the arm that was still embedded in the wall.

Valkenhayn bared his teeth at the sight. His strength, no, something more fundamental, was being sucked away from him by the girl's hand touching him.

"That's... Soul Eater!" From a distance, Relius exclaimed in surprise. While listening to his partner's unusual voice with dulled hearing, Valkenhayn was finally unable to stand and lost his human form. He was forcibly transformed from a strong young man into a giant wolf.

Thanks to this change, his arms reshaped, and he was naturally freed from the wall, but Saya's hands continued to cling to him.

Soul Eater. The worst kind of Drive that drains the life force from others.

Valkenhayn, who had only heard of its existence, felt a deep sense of despair as he was held by two thin arms...

The girl stared at him as she caught him and held him down with her hands. How could he have predicted that such a child would possess Soul Eater? It was a Drive that he had doubted even existed.

"Aren't you going to help me? I'm going to die, you know?" While still holding one of the wolf's front legs that had collapsed to the floor, Saya turned her face toward Relius, who stood behind her. A smile was on her lips.

The damage from Valkenhayn's kick had long since faded. She had fully healed from the life force she had absorbed. If she continued, the wolfman would eventually die.

Even though he had a life force vastly superior to that of a human, life is finite. Once it was completely drained, that would be the end.

The wolf, slumped helplessly on the floor, could not shake off Saya's hand, which was holding him down with much more strength than it appeared. However, Relius did not move from the spectator area along the wall. On the contrary, he leaned against the wall and chose to watch.

"What a pity..." Relius muttered quietly to no one in particular. His gloved fingers, crossed over his arms, moved up and down as if counting something. Suddenly, those fingers stopped.

"Time's up." The moment Relius sighed with regret, Saya's knee buckled with a dull thud.

"Damn it..." Furrowing her brow in distress, Saya clung to Valkenhayn's arm. But the power she had moments ago was gone. Now, it was just a frail girl trying to hold down a massive wolf.

"The time limit is three minutes... I'll have to investigate what kind of techniques you're using to enhance your physical abilities, but it seems the backlash is quite significant. From the looks of it, even standing must be difficult for you. It's hardly a practical technique."

With his covered eyes, Relius said in a calm, monotonous tone, as if he were observing Saya's condition and simply stating the results.

Ignoring Relius's continuous commentary, Valkenhayn raised the beast's head vigorously. He got up by lifting his rounded back, returned to human form, twisted his body, and threw Saya off his arm.

Thrown to the other side of the wall, Saya landed on the floor without trying to catch herself. With a small groan, Saya tried to get up. But her arms trembled on the floor, struggling to support even her light weight.

"What a shame... If I only had a little more time." Saya muttered resentfully as she dragged herself up, letting out ragged breaths.

If only there had been a little more time, she could have completely drained his life force. That was the logic of the Grim Reaper.

Saya, lying on the floor, uttered those eerie words with complete sincerity. Valkenhayn, stumbling but determined, took a large step forward.

"Soul Eater... I see. Now that I know you're a user, I can't just let you be."

"Valkenhayn. Don't kill her." Relius called out to the wounded beastman, as if to remind him. But Valkenhayn didn't even turn his head. He didn't hear Relius's words. He took a few more steps, his feet moving to close the distance.

Saya pulled herself up with all her might. But no matter how much life force she had taken, he was a beastman. Their biological foundations were different.

The wolfman's speed did not wane. Saya, on the other hand, could barely lift herself up, and her beloved sword was far out of reach.

With a wolf's roar, Valkenhayn raised his hand with sharp, gleaming claws. His arm would tear skin, crush flesh, and shatter bone. There was no mercy, no compassion. His sharp claws tore through the air for only one purpose: to kill his prey.

And then—

"Uraaah!"

A young man's voice rang out as a dark figure leaped in and landed a rough kick on the side of Valkenhayn's face.

—

The dusty floor made a rough, gravelly sound as Naoto landed.

The old, dilapidated building was on the verge of ruin, with only the tenant signs remaining, and the inside was empty except for the snack bar in the basement.

Naoto jumped through a broken window into a former video shop on the second floor, losing his balance and brushing his hand against the floor as he raised his face.

The room was filled with a dreary atmosphere, with empty steel shelves toppled over, leaning against the walls like a failed game of dominoes. The floor was quite spacious, but two thick pillars in the center and abandoned shelves and cardboard boxes made it feel much more cramped than it really was.

The air was dusty, and breathing it in made him want to cough. Amidst all this, Naoto spotted the tall man he had just kicked and glared at him with strong hostility. In his line of sight was a tall man with wild, unruly hair swept back.

Valkenhayn Hellsing. A beastman who could transform into both a wolf and a human, and a slayer of the undead hired by the Mitsurugi Agency. On the sleeves of his deep-colored suit, there was a whitish scuff from Naoto's sneaker treads.

"Weren't you guys supposed to be hunting immortals!? What the hell are you doing getting serious with a kid in such a deserted place, you pervert!"

"You are...Naoto Kurogane. Did you come here to be killed?" Valkenhayn's eyes, filled with contempt at Naoto's scornful words, were now ablaze with hostility and a fighting spirit.

Naoto was taken aback for a moment when his name was called, but he quickly figured out how the other man knew. Kiirō must have told him. The mere thought of the mysterious woman from the Mitsurugi Agency, who wasn't here, gave Naoto a nasty, sticky feeling in his chest.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Raquel gracefully descending from the remnants of the tenant space. Just her presence seemed to brighten the air, likely due to her otherworldly and noble aura.

Wrinkling her nose in disgust at the dusty, unclean room, Raquel looked around as if inspecting it. Her gaze landed on a man standing alone, his eyes obscured by a black band.

"So you're not nestled under the boy's arm today." Realizing the words were directed at her, Raquel stared intently at the blindfolded man, Relius.

"Relius Clover..."

He was the Immortal Breaker targeting her father, Clavis Alucard, alongside Valkenhayn. However, after examining him from head to toe as if seeing through him, Raquel furrowed her finely shaped eyebrows in confusion.

"...No, it's not you." Raquel seemed to be searching for something in the room. But Naoto, with his blood boiling, was too focused on the situation to care or even notice.

Ever since Haruka had invited him to go grocery shopping and Raquel had suddenly murmured about feeling a presence, Naoto had been searching for a Drive user who might be causing trouble somewhere. He had even flown into the sky with Raquel to find the scene, only to find this situation.

He wasn't sure why Saya and Valkenhayn were fighting. It was clear they both had a tendency to resort to violent and reckless means to resolve issues. One of them must have started the fight.

(Probably Saya...)

Glancing back at his sister over his shoulder, Naoto's expression twisted bitterly. Saya still couldn't get up. She sat slumped, her kimono soiled by dust, hands pressed to the floor. It must have been tough for her to stay upright.

Her thin shoulders trembled, rising and falling with rough breaths. Her face was pale, and she didn't look like a girl who could wield a katana. Yet, the spark of fighting spirit still burned in her expression as she looked up at Naoto with accusing eyes.

"Brother...you shouldn't have..."

"Don't be ridiculous! What shouldn't I have done? You're the one who's been doing something stupid!"

Raquel turned around in surprise at Naoto's sudden outburst. Saya was intimidated and fell silent. Naoto clenched his fists tightly, trying to suppress the emotions that were raging inside him.

"You suddenly show up at my house, and then I don't hear from you for a while, and then I find out you're fighting some freak like this. What the hell were you thinking? You said you were going to kill me, and now you want to kill yourself? You idiot!"

Saya Terumi was a symbol of dark, heavy, painful memories for Naoto. Because of her, their parents died. Many relatives, as well as those who worked in their home, were gone. People he loved, those he didn't care for much, people he had fought with, and those who had inspired him—all of them died because of Saya.

Saya had killed them all.

And yet...

"You're always causing trouble... Don't mess with me, damn it..." Naoto spat out the words resentfully.

And yet, he thought of her as his sister, as family.

He hated her, wanted to stay away from her, and didn't want to see her face, but the moment he saw her about to be finished off by Valkenhayn, it felt like a knife had been plunged through his body. He had moved instinctively to help her.

His worry turned into an anger he couldn't contain. Gathering his rage toward Saya, Naoto glared at Valkenhayn with fierce intensity.

Memories of the fear from their first encounter flooded back—his pierced abdomen, his crushed legs. Just recalling it made his stomach tighten.

He had been beaten so thoroughly back then. Even though he had become somewhat capable of fighting the Apostles, Naoto couldn't believe he could hold his own against Valkenhayn now.

But he couldn't back down.

"Ha, shall we go for a rematch? If you're feeling motivated, I won't hold back."

"You've got some spirit, kid. Alright then, this time I'll crush your head and finish you off." In response to Naoto's lighthearted provocation, Valkenhayn returned with serious killing intent. Ideally, he would have preferred if Valkenhayn would simply leave in disgust, but seeing Valkenhayn get ready for a fight, Naoto made up his mind.

(I'll have Raquel take Saya and escape, and then I'll find a way to get away too!)

He resolved to do just that.

However, just as the fire was about to be ignited, the voices of two who stepped forward suppressed it.

"Wait, Naoto."

"Hold on, Valkenhayn."

Both spoke with a strong tone that left no room for argument.

Naoto and Valkenhayn were both caught off guard by the simultaneous calls from two directions.

"Hey, what's going on..."

"Be quiet... I sense the presence of the Azure. And it's approaching rapidly..." Raising a small hand to stop Naoto from interrupting, Raquel focused her attention with a very urgent expression. As if listening to an almost inaudible sound, her red eyes darted from left to right.

Perhaps it was because of the unusual situation, or perhaps because they sensed something strange like Raquel, Relius and Valkenhayn also fell silent and spread their senses around them.

With a snap, Raquel turned to Naoto.

"Your sister and Valkenhayn. The collision of their powerful Drives has intensified the remnants of Azure in this area to an abnormal degree. And the Azure remnants attract the Azure's power. The stronger it is... do you understand?"

"Ah, just skip to the conclusion. We're in a hurry, aren't we?"

"Right now, this place is an incredibly conspicuous abnormal zone for anyone involved with the Azure... especially for those searching for the presence of Azure."

"So, the conclusion!"

"Spinner will sense it." As soon as Raquel uttered that name, the window outside, where Naoto had jumped in, suddenly lost its brightness and turned black. Naoto hurriedly turned around. It was definitely not sunset. The sun was setting, but even at night, it wouldn't plunge into darkness outside.

Yet all that filled Naoto's sight was pure black.

As if seeping out from the cracks in the floor, the black was covering the window and the surrounding walls.

The black wasn't outside the window. It was inside.

Naoto recognized that strange darkness. He had seen it in the hallway of the night school. It was the mass of darkness that Spinner had brought with him, which had devoured and swallowed people whole.

"You...!" Instinctively stepping forward, Naoto shielded Raquel behind him.

The darkness spread gradually, moving with a creepy motion. From within the depthless black, countless arms shot out with the force of water bursting from a breached dam.. The long, shadow-like arms reached straight out and grabbed Saya, who was frozen in place, pulling her into the darkness with the same force they had when they emerged.

"Wha- Saya!!"

Before Saya could even scream, she was enveloped and vanished. Naoto screamed as if his throat was being ripped open and rushed forward. He never expected Saya would be the target.

His thought process was in chaos, wondering why. Driven by a desperate urge, Naoto lunged into the darkness without a second thought.

He heard Raquel's cry to stop, but he didn't care. He reached out into the darkness, trying to grab its edge, even though he didn't know if he could. But the shadow slipped through Naoto's fingers like liquid and slid out of the window.

"Wait! Saya!" Naoto immediately chased after her, leaning out of the window. The darkness slid up the wall, making a sound like dragging a sandbag. And on the rooftop, he saw a figure. A man with a sinister, gaunt face, dressed in a black suit with his gray hair neatly combed.

Spinner Superior.

He gave Naoto a contemptuous glance before turning away without a word, retreating deeper onto the rooftop. Following him, the darkness also vanished from Naoto's view.

"Damn it... damn it!"

He couldn't run along the walls. Naoto leaped from the second floor without hesitation. He raced up the emergency stairs at full speed.

(Why... why Saya! Why her!)

She had nothing to do with him and Raquel. Did he intend to take her hostage? For what purpose?

(I don't understand!)

His heart pounded and he was having trouble breathing. Forgetting about normal breathing, he ran in a frenzy and kicked open the door to the rooftop.

When he burst out onto the rooftop of the dilapidated building, there was no one there.

The western sky was dyed crimson.

Night was about to fall.

Tonight was supposed to be a full moon.

Chapter 11: Fusion

The vibrant western sun disappeared behind the towering buildings, and in its place, the eastern sky began to take on the colors of night. The gradual change in the color of the sky was like a deep breath, inhaling the day and exhaling the night.

The bustling downtown area, centered around a large building above the Shinkawahama Station, was adorned with a variety of restaurants and shops lining the main street. However, a few blocks in, there was a narrow alleyway that seemed a little too deserted to be called a downtown area, shrouded in shadows.

In such a dimly lit, cheap street, the streetlights began to flicker on as Valkenhayn ran ahead, guided by Relius.

"Relius! Explain what's going on! Where are we heading?" Though Valkenhayn was overwhelmingly faster than Relius when it came to running, the uncertainty of their destination forced him to maintain an irksome pace just behind Relius, who was a step ahead. Frustrated, he shouted at him.

The black shadow they had just seen in the vacant storefront of the building was the result of magic. Although neither Valkenhayn nor Relius had confirmed the sorcerer's identity, it was easy to deduce that it was the work of Spinner Superior, a magician who had recently appeared in Shinkawahama and had previously been involved with Kiirō.

However, Relius didn't seem inclined to pursue the writhing darkness that was likely the magic of Spinner Superior. Instead, he suddenly ran off in a completely different direction after leaving the building.

It was clear that Relius had already lost interest in this matter and was not about to return. He must have some purpose. Otherwise, there was no way he would run on his own without proper instructions.

"Didn't I already tell you? 'We have something to do.'"

"I'm asking you what that something is. If your mouth can move more smoothly than your usual puppet, tell me where and what you intend to do."

"...It's about the job."

"What?" His words were too short. Valkenhayn asked again in a threatening tone.

Relius, glancing around, suddenly turned a corner, causing Valkenhayn to momentarily hesitate and quicken his pace slightly. With his blindfolded eyes looking ahead, Relius lifted his chin slightly.

“Spinner Superior is setting up a barrier in this area to strengthen his magic. As long as the barrier isn’t destroyed, the surrounding area is practically his body. Therefore, we will destroy it. Once the barrier disappears, Kiiro will attack Spinner. Until then, the boy and the vampire from earlier will keep him occupied.”

The cold, emotionless voice stated clearly. The boy and the vampire chasing Spinner and the darkness were merely bait to buy time. Their purpose was to destroy the barrier, allowing Kiiro or themselves to reach Spinner. If they were dead, so be it. And if they were alive, that was all there was to it.

Valkenhayn unconsciously frowned. He felt no sympathy for the group from earlier. However, he often found Relius’s statements like this quite unsettling. How did that man see the world? He was sure that he would never be able to share that feeling, no matter how long his life was.

“Where is the barrier?”

“The first one is up ahead. I’ll search for the rest while you’re destroying it.” Relius spoke without hesitation. Valkenhayn understood that destroying the barrier was his responsibility.

“How do we destroy the barrier?”

“Just physically destroy the places where the magic is applied. That should be your specialty.” Relius’s blunt tone sounded more like sarcasm than anything else. Annoyed, Valkenhayn snorted and brushed the comment aside, which he could only sense as being thrown at him.

The dimly lit side streets were beginning to glow with white light. The night’s veil slowly descended.

Ignoring the occasional curious glances from passersby, Relius and Valkenhayn ran quietly through the city, which was just starting to embrace the night.

—

The sky was painted in hues of dusk and night.

With the sun in the west and the moon in the east, Naoto raced through the dimly lit backstreets, where the pale streetlights began to flicker on, without a moment to spare to look up at the transforming sky.

Running beside him was Raquel, her long hair fluttering like a golden ribbon. Her golden eyes, unlike any he had seen before, were fixed sternly ahead, guiding Naoto towards their destination.

That destination, of course, was where Spinner was.

After Spinner's darkness had taken Saya away and Naoto had chased it to the rooftop but lost sight of it, Raquel, who had come up to the rooftop later, immediately drew a magic circle and began to track Spinner.

Her concern wasn't solely for Saya's safety—though in a way, it could be said that it was. While quickly arranging the strange red symbols that Naoto couldn't understand, Raquel murmured with a tone of urgency.

"Spinner's target is probably Soul Eater. I don't know his purpose, but..." It was unlikely that the man's goals would align with Naoto or Raquel's interests.

Hurriedly completing the magic circle, Raquel stood at its center, gathering the wind for a moment. She firmly engraved the sensed presence of the Azure into her senses, pulling it closer as she pursued Spinner.

Feeling rushed, Naoto stumbled occasionally, struggling to breathe not from fatigue, but from a different kind of tightness in his chest.

Why had things become so complicated? Nothing was going his way. Everything seemed to be going downhill. Naoto groaned in frustration.

(It's all because of that stupid sister of mine!)

He just wanted to hunt Apostles with Raquel, get stronger, defeat Spinner, and become human again within a year. It was already complicated enough at this point, but now his suddenly appearing sister was getting involved.

(She should have just stayed at the Amanohokosaka Castle.)

Why did she always have to meddle in things?

Unconsciously, his tongue clicked again in annoyance.

As if to silence him, Raquel spoke sharply.

"Over there, Naoto." As if awakened by Raquel's voice, Naoto's eyes and consciousness awakened to reality.

They had reached a construction site near the edge of the downtown area. The base of the building was surrounded by a white makeshift wall, behind which a greenish, thin covering draped over tall construction scaffolding. The building under construction was apparently quite tall, and the scaffold continued for a long distance.

Naoto looked up, his gaze wandering.

"Is it in there...?"

Fortunately, whether it was because of a holiday or some sort of trouble, there was no one at the site. Even though it was gradually getting dark, the surroundings were still faintly lit. But the inside of the scaffold was so dark that he couldn't see how far it extended. Naturally, there were no lights since no one was there. Searching inside would be quite difficult.

Just as Naoto was about to slip inside the white enclosure, Raquel's hand grabbed his sleeve and pulled him back.

"Naoto. Up there."

Up. Hearing that, Naoto looked up at the building. It was probably about eight stories high. It was taller than the apartment building where Naoto lived.

Raquel's eyes were fixed on the very top, the roof.

Naoto squinted. But from here, he couldn't even tell if there was anyone on the rooftop. However, a shiver ran down his spine.

"Ugh..." Naoto involuntarily gasped. It felt so... empty.

(Is it my imagination? Because Raquel feels that way, I'm being influenced by her... Or maybe...is it because of the vampire blood mixed in me?)

He had a feeling that something was there. And now, his intuition couldn't be easily ignored by his common sense and rationality.

"Raquel!" Looking up at the building under construction, Naoto called out quickly. Raquel immediately understood his intention and slid her arms around his.

The soft sensation of her body pressed closely against his made Naoto tense up involuntarily. The presence of a girl, clearly different from the boys around him, was sweetly colorful and right next to him, so close that he could feel her breath. It was only natural for him to feel a bit nervous.

"Be very careful." Raquel lifted her face from where it had been resting against his chest. In her serious gaze, Naoto's slightly flustered expression was reflected.

"I feel a great power swelling. Spinner is very strong. You can't handle him alone. Don't forget that. Understood?"

"Y-yeah." Raquel's words, spoken in a warning tone, sent a chill down Naoto's spine.

Ahead of him was Spinner. He had been so focused on getting Saya back, but he realized that he had to stand before that man, fight, and get her back. That realization filled Naoto with fear. But it wasn't a bad fear. It was a necessary fear. He wasn't someone to be faced without fear.

"Hold on tight." With that, Raquel pressed her lips together and concentrated. His senses began to sharpen.

A whirlwind swirled at Raquel's feet. Then, in an instant, it turned into a violent gust of wind, blowing her and Naoto high into the air.

With the wind surrounding them, they soared upward and landed on the rooftop of the building, which was solidly built despite being under construction. The gray concrete, likely to be painted or treated later, was beautifully smoothed out. Steel scaffolding surrounded it, resembling a small arena.

There was no need to look for their target. Amidst the cooler wind that blew stronger than on the ground, the man was leisurely standing in the center of the rooftop.

Dressed in a black, high-quality suit, with slicked-back gray hair and a large, menacing tattoo carved deeply into his cheek, Spinner Superior appeared. His sharply elongated, cold eyes were accompanied by a narrow, icy smile. Without showing any surprise at the arrival of Naoto and Raquel, he gracefully moved his long limbs into a deep bow.

"Good evening, Raquel Alucard. Even on this day, your beauty is blinding... the moon tonight might be too ashamed to emerge from behind the clouds." While keeping his body bowed, he lifted only his face, and Naoto caught a glimpse of a serpent-like tongue flickering from Spinner's mouth.

Behind him, something large was stirring.

Though the dusk was not particularly different from usual, the rooftop felt much darker than the ground below. Perhaps it was due to the faint residual light in the sky. The figure appeared like a shadow puppet backlit by the setting sun... but as Naoto squinted, its true nature became clearer.

"Ugh..." A sound of disgust involuntarily escaped Naoto's lips.

It was an insect. And it was on a completely different scale from Spinner's Apostles that Naoto had encountered before. It was enormous.

Its head, with dull reddish-black eyes, stood much higher than the tall Spinner. The smooth, round head had large, arched jaws protruding forward, and it was clear at a glance that they were its pride and joy.

It had a black, beetle-like skin, but its body was rather long, and it was standing up as if lifting its upper body. Twelve strong, crustacean-like legs were attached to its body, and the second pair from the top was firmly holding a small girl in its arms.

"Saya!" Naoto shouted instinctively.

The captured girl—Saya—was unconscious. Her thin arms, draped in a kimono the color of blossoms, hung limply. Yet, Naoto couldn't believe his eyes.

The number above Saya's head was rising at an astonishing rate.

"What the hell is that... why is Saya's life force skyrocketing?" It was like a broken counter. The number would occasionally slow down, then speed up again, increasing at an unstable pace. He had never seen anything like this before... No.

Recently, when Saya had come to Naoto's house, she had tried to suck out Naoto's life force and kill him. At that time, the number above Saya's head had also risen.

Of course, it wasn't at such an absurd pace as it was now.

"Is it... absorbing life force? From that insect?"

"No."

As Naoto muttered, thinking that couldn't possibly be the case, Raquel threw a harsh denial at him.

"Your sister... the Soul Eater that resides within her is absorbing the life force of all the humans around this building."

"What... what the hell is that!?" For a moment, Naoto couldn't grasp the meaning, his voice trembling with frustration. "Wasn't it supposed to be that Saya could only absorb the life force of the people she touched!?" He was sure Raquel had said that before. Turning sharply, he saw Raquel's expression twisted as if she had bitten into something bitter.

"That's only if your sister is controlling Soul Eater. As I said, the original Soul Eater indiscriminately takes people's life force. Saya is unconscious. So, the one controlling Soul Eater now is..." There was only one person here who could do that, and who would do so.

That man Raquel was glaring at—Spinner.

"...Raquel Alucard. I am somewhat disappointed." While receiving hostility and caution from both Naoto and Raquel, Spinner pressed his hand to his chest with a sorrowful expression. His spread thin fingers were like spider legs. "It is an immense honor that you have chosen to chase after me yourself. However, this Spinner Superior had asked that next time we meet, you bring along the 'real Naoto Kurogane.' And yet..."

Dropping his angular, thin shoulders exaggeratedly, Spinner moved his gaze from Raquel to Naoto. In the meantime, his gaze turned cold and filled with disgust.

"To think you would bring this trash again." His eyes seemed to say that he couldn't stand it physiologically.

Naoto met Spinner's condescending gaze with one of deep contempt. He had no intention of accepting being treated as trash, but that cheap disdain meant nothing to him.

"I don't know what you were expecting, but I'm the real Kurogane Naoto! More importantly, you better let my sister go right now!" Naoto shouted, his anger surging as he carefully gauged the distance and his opponent's movements.

Spinner looked at him with a twisted expression, his large cheek tattoo distorting his features. He appeared utterly exasperated, as if he found Naoto's presence deeply repulsive and grotesque.

"I have no ears to waste on garbage... With all due respect, you should reconsider your pet. It will tarnish your dignity. It's a pity..."

"You bastard..." The words of detached disdain, which didn't even acknowledge his dignity, were almost painfully obvious. The attitude toward Raquel was equally blatant. Naoto felt a deep resentment, wondering just how worthless he was seen.

Beside Naoto, Raquel stepped forward a few paces, lifting her chin without a hint of fear. Her posture straightened, and she locked her sparkling eyes onto Spinner's figure, embodying a strength that matched her youthful appearance.

"Spinner Superior. I demand the same of you as Naoto. Release that girl immediately and stop Soul Eater." Her commanding tone had a strength that demanded no argument. Feeling that natural intimidation, Spinner smiled deeply, almost gleefully.

"I'm sorry, but even if it's a request from 'Slave Red,' I cannot comply. This is a very important time... I need a great deal of human souls."

"Important time? What exactly do you intend to do?" Raquel furrowed her brow. The man spoke in a strange way. There was no malice or ill will in his words, but rather a gentle tone and expression as if he were caressing something.

"It's all for my beloved Raquel Alucard." As if there were passion hidden there, Spinner clapped his hands together at his chest. With a pained expression, his dark eyes looked at Raquel.

The gaze that Spinner directed at Raquel was perverted and morbid, and even though he wasn't the one receiving it, Naoto felt a sense of discomfort creeping up from his feet. Raquel, who was directly receiving it, looked back at Spinner without changing her expression much.

Spinner continued to speak in a melodic tone. "My desire is to have you... all of you, the noble and beautiful maiden who is closest to the Azure's wisdom... I want to have all of you..."

Mid-sentence, Spinner lightly licked his lips as if to quench his thirst. The tongue he revealed was long and had a black tattoo on it as well.

"Your hair, your eyes, your breath, your heartbeat, everything! I want to make it all mine, and reach the depths of the Azure that I yearn for so much. To do that, I have to capture you. But just an insect won't do. I need to prepare a special insect worthy of welcoming Raquel Alucard."

"I don't remember asking for such a thing."

"Isn't it disappointing to be a man who can only prepare what he is asked for?" Spinner replied calmly, but as he continued, his expression softened just a little, as if in concern. "But... to complete this special insect, a great many human souls are necessary. I had the insects create nests in places where people gather so that I could collect them in bulk..."

"I see, so that's why it was Isa." Naoto lowered his voice heavily, not wanting to understand.

Isa frequented a school, a place where many people gathered every day. It meant that Shinkawahama First High School was almost going to become Spinner's feeding ground.

"Not only was I unable to gather resources, but before I could even finish building my nest, many of my Apostles were destroyed by you and those annoying people. I was at my wit's end. It was at that time..." Spinner slowly turned his head and looked at the massive insect quietly resting beside him. He narrowed his already slim eyes with a satisfied smile.

"I found this girl... this Soul Eater! As rumored, it is a wonderful power. With this, I can gather people's souls as I please. I no longer need to scatter Apostles and collect them slowly. Everything I need will be gathered tonight. On this glorious night of the full moon..."

As if blowing out a candle, the surroundings grew darker. The moon turned golden in the eastern sky. Spinner spread his arms wide and took a deep breath. The cold air was now completely night. He exhaled with pleasure, and his eyes fixed on Raquel like a snake.

"Do you understand, Raquel Alucard?" He asked. Raquel took a half-step back, as if startled. Spinner reached out his long hand to follow her. "This is fate. It cannot be resisted... You will be mine." As soon as he declared that, the quality of the air around him changed.

It was heavy. It felt heavy, as if a gravity had begun pulling in a different direction. The pull was coming from Spinner... no, from the insect beside him, from deep inside its legs, from Saya.

Naoto realized. He was being drained. His life force was vanishing at a speed far beyond what it had been moments ago.

It wasn't just Naoto who was being robbed. Raquel, standing next to him, stumbled as if she were about to faint. Above her golden hair, tied with a black ribbon, a countdown of diminishing life force was visible only to Naoto's eyes.

"Damn it... you've gotta be kidding me!" Struggling not to stumble, Naoto braced his weakening legs and shouted angrily, supporting Raquel next to him. Raquel clung to his supporting arm, her expression stern.

"This is bad... we have to stop Soul Eater. If we don't, it will suck the life out of everyone in this area, and Spinner will..."

"That's not the point! It's not about the insect..." Naoto grabbed Raquel's shoulders with both hands and pulled her close, gently shaking her to encourage her to stand strong. Raquel's face was pale. The numbers above her head continued to decrease without stopping. If it continued to decrease like this, the number would eventually become '0'.

"If this goes on, everyone will die!"

Even random people who just happened to be around this building, or anyone he might have crossed paths with. Or even Raquel, whose life force was draining twice as fast as Naoto's.

"I won't let that happen. Absolutely not." Naoto glared at Spinner and kicked the cold ground hard. His feet moved faster than he thought possible. His body felt light, and his limbs moved more smoothly than he expected.

He could reach it.

In a matter of seconds, Naoto was right in front of Spinner, and he raised his fist without hesitation...

"You bastard, don't think you can just do whatever you want!"

He struck with all his might.

—

A wet sound sliced through the air.

It was the sound of blood. And then, the sound of flesh tearing.

"Ugh..." Naoto ground his teeth, trying to suppress a different kind of rising sensation. It was a pain that felt like his insides were being ripped out. The flesh below his ribs had been torn, fortunately missing his organs. But all the blood seemed to drain from his body at once, followed by a wave of pain and shock that forced Naoto's raised arm to fall limply.

His hand moved on its own to press against his side. Glancing down, he saw his hand was stained red from the blood seeping through his uniform.

"Damn...!"

Naoto quickly looked up, his gaze fixed on the creature that had suddenly appeared before him.

It was that bug.

Just a moment ago, it had been further back. Now, this enormous insect—or was it a caterpillar?—with its abdomen encased in a sheath, was right in front of Naoto's face. It was an ugly creature with an appearance so grotesque that it evoked a visceral sense of disgust.

Unlike Spinner's Apostles he had faced before, this creature was clearly different, and not just in its abnormal size. Its jaws were like a pair of serrated saws, its legs thick and sharp, and despite its rapid movements, there was a physical heaviness to it that could be felt in the sounds it made.

Its appearance and structure were simple as far as mechanics went, but each part was a one-sided weapon capable of easily taking a human life.

The very top, the thickest and sharpest of the insect's legs, was slightly stained with blood at its tip. It looked like a pillow, but its sharpness was more akin to a comb or a sliver of silver. The cutting edge was sharper than it appeared to the eye, and it had sliced open Naoto's side.

Thanks to his reflexes, or perhaps just pure luck, he had only been grazed, but if he had taken a direct hit, Naoto might have found himself looking at his severed lower half.

The insect raised its other leg to strike again. It was fast. But faster than that, a gust of wind swirled at Naoto's feet, pulling his injured body back. Raquel drew in the wind as she rushed over.

"How reckless. All you can think about is charging straight in? That's so naive."

"Then what am I supposed to do?" He had expected Spinner to counterattack, but he hadn't expected the bug to intercept him with such speed. If she said it was naive, he couldn't really argue. "If it were a humanoid opponent, I could at least apply some grappling techniques. But that's such an obvious monster..."

"Are you already giving up?"

"Can't a guy at least complain a little?" No sooner had he retorted than Naoto dashed off again. But this time, not towards the bug, but towards the edge of the rooftop.

Perhaps because of its predatory instincts to chase things that ran, the insect plunged its sharp leg into the concrete floor and lunged towards Naoto. Looking over his shoulder, the scene was like something out of a horror movie. With a grimace, Naoto grabbed what he was aiming for.

With almost no strength left, he pulled a steel pipe from the scaffolding. As he turned around, he swung the pipe sideways to deflect the bug's massive attack.

"Damn...!"

There was a dull thud. It felt like he had hit a telephone pole. The shock sent a jolt up his arm to the shoulder.

Of course, he didn't expect to break the insect's legs. But he also didn't think he could handle legs as thick as a telephone pole with just his bare hands. He hoped it would function as armor, not a weapon. Even if he could regenerate, injuries still hurt, and if his arm got blown off, he wouldn't be able to attack until it healed.

Swinging the pipe wildly to avoid the cocoon, Naoto dodged the numerous legs and dove under the barrage of legs. He entrusted the crude weapon to his left hand and rose up like a cobra, striking the bug's torso with his right fist.

"Ugh..." It was hard. It was much more organic than the leg he had hit with the pipe, but even so, he felt like he might shatter his knuckles.

Naoto looked at his right hand and clicked his tongue.

(Something's wrong... it wasn't like this. Back then, it was more...)

Back then was when he had punched Isa. He didn't remember it clearly because he had been so caught up in the moment, but in his hazy memory, his fist had indeed sunk deeply into Isa's body, stained red. It felt as if it were covered in a pot of blood.

If he could strike like he did back then, he would be able to deal more damage to this monster. But Naoto didn't know how to do that.

"Damn it!"

He had no choice but to keep hitting. Pulling back his remaining fist for another strike, the insect twisted its lower limbs and swung them fiercely like a tail, delivering a powerful blow. It was more of a tackle than a leg sweep. Naoto, bracing himself with the iron pipe, was sent flying like a rag doll. He hit his back against something and bounced, rolling all the way to the opposite edge.

It was an insane amount of force. If he hadn't had the pipe, he probably would have cracked a rib or two. Fearing a follow-up attack, Naoto jumped up. But then, he felt a sharp pain and his face contorted.

"What...?" The pain was more intense in his side than in his chest or back. Gasping, Naoto looked down. He pressed his hand against the tear in his blood-soaked uniform. The wet sensation shot pain through him. Naoto stared in shock. When he lifted his hand, it was stained with fresh blood.

"No way... why...?"

His wound wasn't healing.

Normally a wound this small would have disappeared by now. But instead of closing, it was bleeding profusely with every movement.

Raquel quickly noticed Naoto's condition. She glared at Spinner with a stern expression.

"What's going on... what exactly is that bug?"

"Oh, are you interested? How unexpected. Someone as noble as you would be better suited to tea."

"That's not what I'm asking!" Raquel snapped, her voice sharp. Spinner raised an eyebrow leisurely, as if savoring the sweet sting in her tone.

"Yes... I understand. Don't worry, Raquel Alucard. This Spinner Superior may jest with you, but I would never lie." With an attitude that seemed designed to irritate people, Spinner gestured grandly towards the enormous insect. "That bug was originally intended for your owner, Clavis

Alucard. Unfortunately, your owner is a mere Fantasy Creature." The mention of Clavis Alucard caused Raquel's shoulders to twitch.

Naoto, using the iron pipe as a makeshift pillow, grimaced at the name he heard. The blood drained from his face.

Spinner furrowed his brow in annoyance and traced the tattoo on his cheek with a long finger.

"Since you're dealing with the king of vampires, of course, it had to have the bare minimum of necessary qualities. That bug's jaws, fangs, claws... they wound 'existence itself.' No matter how quickly vampires can repair physical damage, wounds to their very existence can't be healed. ...Isn't that right, Raquel Alucard?" Spinner asked Raquel with a smug, leisurely tone, as if he were extracting an obvious answer.

Raquel bit her lip and looked down. To Naoto, her expression was more revealing than Spinner's words. He didn't understand the complicated reasoning, and he didn't want to. But basically, it seemed that wounds inflicted by that bug wouldn't heal.

(Hey, hey, hey, that's a cruel joke... so that's what you mean by a 'special bug'?)

Given that his body healed so quickly under normal circumstances, he had been reckless enough to charge straight at it.

Despite his shock, Naoto raised the iron pipe again, focusing on the bug. Judging from Spinner's words, and the fact that the cocoon was still absorbing life force from its surroundings, the special bug wasn't complete yet.

So what would happen when it was completed? Would it become a creature capable of withstanding a fight against Clavis?

(If that happens, I won't stand a chance...)

A sense of crisis crept over Naoto.

With a sound like metal stakes being driven into the ground, the bug plunged its sharp leg into the concrete and lunged at Naoto. With the same speed and force, it swung its two upper legs down at Naoto in quick succession.

"Ugh, wait..." There was no hesitation, and he could hardly catch his breath. Naoto jumped back, narrowly avoiding the attack of the living weapon. But he jumped back too far and his back hit the wall. One of the insect's legs thrust in from the front, targeting his head.

Naoto ducked, his body slumping. A few strands of his hair scattered. This was no time to be afraid. Dragging his trembling body, Naoto threw himself forward.

Where Naoto's butt had been a moment ago, the bug's leg had shattered the concrete with a powerful swing.

He pushed himself up with his hands, but his legs wouldn't move. As he turned to see what was happening, he found one of the bug's supporting legs had pinned his uniform to the concrete, embedding itself into the flesh of his calf.

"Ugh..." Once he saw it, the pain surged up to his brain. A red stain began to spread beneath the insect's foot.

(This is bad...)

His vision darkened briefly, and Naoto turned around with a vacant mind. The insect, having captured its prey, raised its sharp leg towards Naoto.

He couldn't escape. He had to brace for impact. As he looked up at the insect, Naoto searched for the iron pipe in his hands. But it seemed he had let go of it when he collapsed earlier. His fingertips grazed the cold metal, but he couldn't reach it.

The air was torn apart with a sharp hiss. Naoto held his breath, bracing himself for impact and intense pain. But then, something caught him unexpectedly.

"Gagagagagaga!"

With a muddy scream resembling a gargle, a thick spray scattered around him. Naoto saw this through the strong wind that nearly obscured his vision.

"Ah... Thanks for the save!" He gave a relieved smile. It was Raquel, wrapped in a gust of wind, who had scooped Naoto up and carried him away from danger.

The insect's leg that had pinned Naoto's foot to the ground had been severed at the base. The wind, sharpened to an extreme, tore through it like a scythe.

Once they were a safe distance away, Naoto was released from Raquel's wind. As the wind returned to the night sky with a roar, Naoto lost his balance and fell on his butt. Next to him, Raquel also stumbled slightly as if the wind had swept her feet out from under her.

"Ha... ha... ha..." Raquel breathed heavily, her chest rising and falling rapidly. Her usually composed expression was gone, replaced by one of exhaustion, showing that even though her life force was several times that of a normal human, it was still taking its toll.

"Hey, are you okay?" Naoto couldn't help but ask, seeing her pale lips and cheeks.

Raquel answered without looking at him. "That's my line... For a mere servant to cause me such trouble..."

"You're surprisingly energetic," he said with a forced smile, but Naoto was no more at ease than Raquel.

"If this drags on, it'll be bad. We need to stop Soul Eater somehow. If I can't keep going, neither can you." Before Raquel could finish, her words punctuated with heavy breaths, the insect turned around and charged towards them again.

With a cry of alarm, Naoto pulled himself up and jumped to the right, while Raquel jumped to the left, dodging the insect's charge. The insect quickly turned back toward Naoto. It seemed he was its primary target. Naoto ducked low to avoid the sweeping leg and then took off running.

If Soul Eater continued to absorb life force, Raquel would eventually run out. And if that happened, Naoto would die too. Not to mention, if that special insect absorbed enough souls and completed its form, it would become a creature meant to face Clavis. Naoto could be easily killed in an instant. After all, in front of that insect, he was just an ordinary human with slightly better physical abilities.

(I have to stop Soul Eater... Stop it... But how? There's no way I can get Saya back without dealing with that damn bug first!)

"If I could reach out and grab her, I would. But if I tried to rip off the legs that are grabbing her, I'd probably get impaled three times before I could. Or maybe I'd get decapitated by those saw-like jaws."

(In that case...)

The insect's jaws lunged at Naoto as he fled. Pushed by the wind Raquel unleashed, Naoto barely managed to evade the attack, but the concrete nearby shattered as if it had exploded, and debris rained down like hail.

Unable to withstand the impact, Naoto collapsed, shielding his head with his arm. His injured leg hindered him. Dragging his sluggish body, he crawled on, desperately trying to escape. If he didn't fight back, he would just keep running away. Somehow, he had to attack.

Was it because he was thinking about these unnecessary things?

"Naoto!" Raquel's voice rang out sharply, warning him of danger. A sharp wind shot out from her, but it slid off the bug's tough, leathery skin, unable to wound it. Ignoring the blade-like wind on its back, the insect swung two of its legs down at Naoto, who was still rolling on the ground. Naoto could only stare in shock.

The insect's leg grazed Naoto's left shoulder, sinking into the concrete beside his face. The other leg narrowly missed capturing his torso. His evasion had been purely instinctual, a response driven by raw survival.

There was a strange feeling in his left ear. As he struggled to process this, he continued to breathe heavily, his whole body trembling. He was still alive. But at the same time, he realized something. The insect was now looming over Naoto, and right in front of him lay Saya, slumped like a broken doll.

"Naoto... the Soul Eater..." Raquel stumbled as she tried to run towards him, her voice trailing off. It was as if she had lost words. But Naoto understood what she was trying to say.

He could reach her now.

It wasn't enough to tear off the arm and retrieve Saya. But it was enough to kill.

If he killed Saya, Soul Eater would stop.

It will stop.

"Are you going to kill it?"

A voice asked the question. Where did it come from? Naoto was bewildered as he realized that his surroundings had closed in with darkness, leaving him unable to see anything.

His body, which should have been lying down, felt as if it were standing upright. There was no pain from his injuries, nor was there the fear of the insect looming nearby.

So where was he, and what was happening to him now?

Before Naoto could even gather his thoughts about the situation, the voice asked again.

"Will you kill her?"

Kill who? His sister... Saya.

The voice that asked was unfamiliar—deep, heavy, and powerful.

"Will you kill your sibling?"

"Of course I will!" Naoto squeezed out in a dry voice, unable to even look at himself. He had to stop Soul Eater. If he didn't, both Raquel and he would die. Many innocent people would die too.

Saya was the murderer of Naoto's parents. Because of her, Naoto's peaceful life had been plunged into a bloody tragedy. That memory was deeply ingrained in his mind, something he could never forget.

In addition, Saya was trying to kill him to become the head of the family. She was trying to take his life, all for such a purpose, as if it were a noble cause.

Who would complain if he killed her?

Who would be sad if he killed her?

She was a girl feared and shunned by everyone.

"But still..." Naoto spat out. "Of course I'm going to save you!"

The moment he shouted, Naoto's vision suddenly cleared. Before him was an enormous insect looming over him, and Saya, unconscious in its abdomen. The situation hadn't changed. His time of hesitation in the black world seemed as if it had never existed in reality.

His ragged breathing calmed down. The insect's jaws opened with a spring-like motion, ready to finish off its helpless prey. The jaws, curving gently, became flatter and sharper towards the tip, easily capable of slicing through human flesh and bone.

But before the jaws could decapitate him, Naoto moved as if he had been shot. His stomach was burning. It felt like something was boiling inside him. Driven by a sense of urgency bordering on desperation, he leaped up and punched with all his might.

"Uaaaaaah!" An involuntary scream erupted from his throat. His fist plunged straight into the bug's abdomen. His right arm was encased in a crimson, steel-like substance. With another blow, this time an upward thrust, he struck the bug's torso. His left hand grabbed the bug's leg.

His fist couldn't pierce the bug's skin this time. However, he could feel a distinctly different sensation of flesh and blood.

It was working. Although he couldn't visually confirm whether damage was actually being inflicted because the life force number above the bug's head was still '0,' Naoto was certain of it.

"Saya..."

Seemingly taken aback by the unexpected counterattack, the insect began thrashing around. To restrain the writhing giant, Naoto grabbed one of the insect's legs with his right hand to pin it down.

"Let go of meeeee!"

There was the sound of something hard breaking, and the bug's black, armor-like skin split open in front of Naoto. Twisting its joint, he wrenched the bug's leg off, spewing a foul liquid. A putrid, meat-like stench filled the air.

Tossing away the severed leg, Naoto grabbed the other leg that was still holding Saya and tore it off as well.

Angered by the violent act, the insect swung its jaws toward Naoto's head. Despite its size, its movements were swift, like a falling guillotine. If he had tried to dodge, he would have lost half his head. So Naoto raised both arms beside his face to block the approaching jaws from both sides.

His left arm, however, was not unscathed. The jaws' blades sunk into his flesh, but they didn't shatter the bone.

"Damn it..."

The insect's jaws continued to press down, intent on crushing Naoto. Naoto pushed back against the jaws, enduring the burning pain in his left arm as they sank deeper into the flesh with every push, unlike his right arm that was completely protected by a layer of blood.

Then a gust of wind swept past. A golden ribbon of hair fluttered at the edge of Naoto's vision. Raquel jumped in and delivered a powerful kick to the insect's jaw from below. With a hard crack, the bug's grip weakened for a moment. In that instant, Naoto escaped the threat of being amputated.

Flipping in midair, Raquel landed another kick on the jaw. The inhuman strength, befitting a vampire, forced the bug to stagger back. Taking advantage of the opening, Naoto stepped in.

A leg, swinging like a flail, slashed horizontally. Naoto caught it with his raised right arm and positioned his body to slip beneath the insect, aiming for its abdomen. One wrong move and he'd be crushed. If he was pierced by one of the countless moving legs, it would be the end. Using the leg he had just been pierced by—still soaked in blood—as leverage, he slammed his knee into it.

Another hard crack.

One more time, and then another. He continued to slam his knee, then switched to his fists. The insect's jaws thrashed wildly, swatting Naoto aside as he struggled with its abdomen.

As Naoto was sent flying like a pendulum, Raquel's wind quickly caught him. Taking advantage of that opening, Raquel was also swept away by the insect's jaws, but in the meantime, Naoto rushed to cover the distance he had been thrown.

Raquel's wind pushed him from behind. Naoto ran at the same speed as the wind. Slipping into the abdomen he had been pounding just moments ago, he thrust his right hand in with all his might. Finally, there was the sound of flesh tearing, and Naoto's blood-stained fist ripped a hole into the bug's body.

As he pulled his arm out, heavy bodily fluids poured out like a waterfall. The stench was horrible.

Ignoring it, Naoto kicked off the ground. The wind became his wings. Leaping high, Naoto reached above the insect's head and, this time, using the power of the wind to aid his descent, he drove his right arm into the insect's eye. After the feeling of breaking plastic, a jelly-like sensation came.

"Gagaga, ga, gagagagagaga!" The bug convulsed violently. But there was no extra reaction, no sign of pain. It simply thrashed around, trying to attack Naoto, and slammed its head into the concrete, keeping Naoto attached.

"...!" A silent scream escaped from Naoto's throat. The pain was distant, merely heavy. Naoto, buried under the insect's full weight and sunk into the concrete floor, was helplessly crushed.

(...No, I can move.)

It was different from that time... when he had first faced the Apostle and was buried under the rubble, unable to move. Even though the bug was crushing him, Naoto could move. It was then that he finally realized his body wasn't being crushed at all.

A thin membrane, like... the wind, was separating Naoto from the concrete and from the bug, creating a thin protective barrier.

(Raquel...)

The reason he couldn't breathe was because of the wind pressure. If that was the case, there was nothing to fear.

"Thank you... Master!"

Squeezing out a voice that was almost a whisper, Naoto grinned at the corners of his mouth. The wind seemed to dissipate as if losing its strength. The weight of the bug increased accordingly, but Naoto's body became free. As soon as the wind completely collapsed and disappeared, Naoto grabbed the bug's head with both arms. With a muffled thud echoing through his body, he poured all his strength into it.

"Ah... ah... g-n-n-n... OOOOOH!" Roaring from the depths of his stomach, Naoto pushed back against the bug's massive body with all his might. The weight that seemed immovable began to shift under his force.

Naoto could feel the blood rushing through his body like fire. His strength was circulating. It felt more like squeezing than surging, and Naoto lifted the massive body he was holding.

He saw a dark figure in the distance. Anger welled up inside him. He let out a roar of rage, expelling it like a breath from a bellows.

"Uraaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Naoto swung the massive body of the bug he had lifted and hurled it toward Spinner, who stood frozen with a look as if witnessing something grotesque.

—

For a while, sound and sensation felt distant, and Naoto gasped for breath in the center of the shattered concrete crater, his whole body heaving. The blood vessels in his body had burst and were gushing out, soaking his forehead and back, and he almost lost consciousness. Blood was flowing from various places, and he couldn't tell where the sweat ended and the blood began.

A high-pitched ringing echoed in his ears. His blurred vision, which had been barely rising and falling with his breaths, gradually began to regain clarity.

It was night. A round moon hung in the sky, wrapped in a light that seemed both silver and gold, casting a soft glow over the dark rooftop. The cold wind blowing in from nowhere felt refreshingly cool against his body, which was nearing its limit.

"Right..."

As he watched the sweat dripping from his forehead to his chin and then to the ground, Naoto finally began to stir his sluggish thoughts. He moved his creaking body and turned to look over his shoulder.

Not far away, at the edge of the crater, Raquel was sitting and looking over at him. A girl's head rested on her lap. It was unclear whether Saya was alive or dead. Her pale pink kimono lay lifeless, completely rumpled.

It seemed like such a waste for something that should have been so beautiful. With that random thought in mind, Naoto awkwardly climbed out of the crater.

"Thanks, Raquel." As he approached her, Naoto managed a faint smile. It was obvious to Naoto that Saya was alive. Although it was much lower than that of a normal human, there was a sufficient life force number floating above Saya's sleeping head.

Raquel must have been protecting Saya just as she had protected Naoto. He couldn't help but feel a sense of gratitude when he looked into her large, golden eyes that were gazing up at him.

"Uh, are you okay?" It was Raquel he was more worried about. Naoto grimaced as he asked.

The number floating above Raquel's head had decreased significantly. Apparently, the absorption of life force by Soul Eater had stopped, and the decrease in numbers had also stopped. But the number, which was eighty million, had dropped to ten million.

Naoto didn't know how critical a situation that was for a vampire. But after losing that much, there was no way she could be fine. In fact, Raquel had looked quite strained during the battle with the bug.

Would she go into his shadow and rest as she had before? Contrary to Naoto's expectations, Raquel gently laid Saya down on the concrete floor and stood up with a calm composure.

"I'm fine. More importantly, Naoto, this girl—"

"Ah, yeah."

With that, Raquel brushed past Naoto and began walking away. What was she planning to do? Prompted by her tone, Naoto moved to stand beside Saya and watched Raquel's movements.

Raquel headed toward the massive corpse of the insect that had been thrown on the rooftop of the building under construction. Beneath the lifeless body, which had lost its strength and could no longer move, was the upper half of a human. It was Spinner, who had been crushed after failing to dodge the creature Naoto had thrown.

With a light jump, Raquel crossed over the crater and landed beside the crawling Spinner.

The distance between Naoto and the place where Raquel and Spinner were wasn't that far. It was about twenty meters, with the crater in between. But to Naoto the scene looked like something happening on the other side of the Boundary.

"You've lost, Spinner Superior." Raquel said quietly to Spinner, who was unable to crawl out from under the monster he had created.

Naoto remembered something he had completely forgotten. Raquel had been targeted by Spinner, but Raquel had also been targeting Spinner. Her goal was to obtain all information about the Azure that Spinner possessed. She probably intended to extract it from him.

Spinner, who was lying on his back, stretched his neck to look up at Raquel, who was standing in a position just out of reach of his outstretched hand.

"No..." Though his breathing was surely being constricted, Spinner responded calmly, almost serenely, a faint smile even appearing at the corners of his mouth.

It wasn't a look of defeat. Raquel frowned, puzzled. As if gazing at something dazzling, Spinner narrowed his eyes.

"No, Raquel Alucard. It seems you are greatly mistaken. I never thought I could win against you. Such an audacious notion is far too presumptuous. Didn't I tell you? Or have you forgotten... about my law..."

His tone was gentle, yet there was an unexpected glimmer of something ominous mixed in. The air grew tense. Spinner deepened his smile and spoke with a hint of rapture.

"I said I want to have you."

The moment Spinner finished that thought, suddenly, his shadow loomed large on the gray concrete floor, creeping up to Raquel's feet. Naturally, it was not a shadow cast by the empty moon. From the writhing shadow, something began to rise.

"Raquel!" Sensing something was wrong, Naoto shouted sharply. Raquel also sensed the disturbance, trying to pull her feet away from the eerie shadow at her feet. But those feet were ensnared by the countless legs that emerged from the darkness.

"Wha...!"

The shadow quickly took form, overpowering Raquel's voice of astonishment.

It resembled... a spider.

Though it was less massive than the enormous, grotesque insect from before, the sinister atmosphere it exuded was even more overwhelming.

Its black body had a vague outline, making it difficult to distinguish from the shadow. Eight white, bone-like legs, which seemed to have no flesh, stretched from the dark abyss and crawled up the concrete floor.

Those legs moved skillfully, grabbing Raquel and dragging her into its depths. It was trying to swallow her into the gaping maw of shadow.

"What... what is this power...?" Raquel, restrained by the bony legs, struggled to break free. But her feet sank into the shadow as if she had stepped into a swamp.

"Raquel! Run! Hurry!" Without understanding what was happening, Naoto started running urgently. He ran straight towards Raquel, crossing the broken and unstable ground. His injured

legs felt like weights. He had never realized how bothersome it was that his wounds wouldn't heal. He seemed to have gotten used to his half-finished body. Stumbling and nearly falling, Naoto stretched out his arm with all his might.

Raquel also stretched her thin arm towards Naoto from between the cage-like bone legs.

"Nao...to..." It was the first time he had heard her voice begging for help. But before she could finish, the spider closed its eight legs like the mouth of an insectivorous plant, completely swallowing Raquel into the shadows. He could almost hear the sound of her being gulped down.

Having lost his target, Naoto leaned forward and fell to the ground. His outstretched arm had only grazed the edge of the shadow.

"No... this can't be happening..." Naoto's mind struggled to keep up with the shocking situation unfolding before him. He stared in disbelief at the writhing shape of the spider creature.

Raquel was gone. Not a single strand of her golden hair was visible. Instead, the eight bones opened again with a strange movement, returning to the shape of a spider's legs, and the shadow that had swallowed Raquel slowly climbed up onto the spider. The shadow writhed and took the form of a man. Spinner.

Looking down, Spinner was no longer under the giant bug's corpse. With his upper body protruding from the spider's body, Spinner pulled out a long, thin arm from the writhing darkness and spread his long, thin fingers wide, gazing at his hands with a smile.

"I have it... finally... ah, at last, what I have long sought..." The words came out in fragmented sighs, like whispers between the chimes of a bell. Spinner's thin, bony fingers trembled slightly as he crossed his outstretched hands over his chest. His eyebrows furrowed with intense pleasure.

His form could hardly be called human. His upper body still had the form of the man, Spinner Superior, but his lower half had lost all semblance of humanity, merging with the bony legs of the spider that crawled from the shadows. Half human, half monster. His appearance, which seemed to belong in a myth, filled Naoto with an intense feeling of disgust.

"Hey... you... what the hell did you do... to Raquel!?" Stumbling to his feet, Naoto shouted, shaking off the disgust that seemed to bind his whole body. He didn't understand what was happening. Whenever Naoto had questions, it was always Raquel who answered them.

But now Raquel was gone, and in her place was the strange man who had swallowed her, answering Naoto's questions.

"It's exactly as it appears. I have absorbed Raquel Alucard, the key to reach the Azure. Her soul will slowly melt inside me, merging with mine until we become completely identical. We will

fuse... yes, we will become one. I will merge with everything she has and eventually reach an unknown mystery..." Spinner sang as if it were something wonderful and sweet. And he probably truly believed it. "Oh, I never expected to obtain it so soon. Thanks to Soul Eater, I was able to create a special insect designed to capture Raquel Alcard."

"Special insect...? So you weren't after that huge thing after all..."

No matter how it had come to be, the insect that Spinner had carefully nurtured during their battle was the key to swallowing Raquel and merging with her.

Defeating Naoto wasn't particularly important to Spinner; it was merely a diversion. While he watched Naoto desperately running and struggling, he must have thought, Come to me, Raquel Alucard... while licking his lips.

Spinner spread his arms wide and looked up at the sky.

"Now... I can hear it, I can feel it... I see the Gate. Distortion, open your mouth now and guide me... to the chaotic emptiness where everything swirls... to the 'Boundary'!" He proclaimed loudly, as if some divine being were present.

His voice and words became powerful, causing a dark red magic circle to appear beneath the spider legs. The magic circle glowed dully, and its light flickered slowly like the heartbeat of a formless monster.

Something was stirring. A black mist surrounded Spinner, creeping in from all directions. It gradually began to gather beside him, starting to swirl like a whirlpool in the void. The vortex grew larger and larger.

Naoto frowned at the sight. He felt a sense of dread. Something very bad was about to begin. Above all, if this was the result of absorbing Raquel... it was terribly, terribly, unbearably unforgivable.

"You bastard... You used Raquel for something you don't even understand!" He raised his voice, trying to rouse himself. Naoto scolded himself for nearly succumbing to the pain and fear that threatened to overwhelm him, and he charged at Spinner.

Fortunately, the sensation from earlier still lingered. His fist, drawn back, instantly turned red, stained with Raquel's blood. But... just before reaching his target, Naoto's right arm abruptly vanished.

"...Huh?"

With a heavy thud, what had once been his arm transformed into a mass of blood, falling at his feet. It happened in an instant. Without any pain, Naoto's right arm, from the shoulder down, was gone, revealing a black, smooth cross-section devoid of flesh or bone.

He stopped short, frozen, just a step away, as Spinner quickly extended his arm and pressed his palm against Naoto's abdomen. In the next moment, a force erupted from that hand.

"Ugh..." A blow far more powerful than any clumsy punch struck Naoto's abdomen, gouging into it. The upward thrust from below completely took Naoto's breath away for a second, violently shaking his crammed internal organs.

"Geh, gah... oeh, **cough**!" With his lungs and stomach convulsing, Naoto collapsed to his knees, coughing violently. He had only taken one hit. Yet his brain was fading and his eyes were welling up with tears.

"There's no need to be so flustered, it's only natural." Spinner looked down at Naoto, who was doubled over coughing, from a higher position than before due to his monstrous transformation. "That right arm of yours was made from Raquel Alucard's blood, wasn't it? But Raquel Alucard has been absorbed into me, and your connection to her has weakened. Thus, the benefits of her blood have also lost their power. It's as simple as that..."

"Damn it... then!" Biting his lip once, Naoto stepped forward again. Pivoting on his armless right side, he swung his leg horizontally, trying to kick the bony leg to pieces. But at that moment, a strange creature lunged from the ground and bit into his supporting leg.

It was so sudden that he couldn't tell if it was an insect or something else entirely. All he could see was a bulging eye that seemed on the verge of popping out and a disturbingly perfect set of pure white teeth.

"Ugh..."

Suddenly, his knee buckled, and he collapsed to the ground, unable to support himself. He didn't want to think about what had just happened, but his mind understood all too well. Memories of the time he had lost his arm in the abandoned apartment complex flooded back. A heavy, distant pain asserted itself behind the shock of loss, throbbing insistently.

He knew, but he couldn't help but look. Naoto looked at his lower right limb over his shoulder with his armless right side. His right leg had been bitten off just above the knee. A moment later, thick blood began to flow from the wound, as if it had been forgotten about.

Spinner looked down at him with a mocking smile. "Do you remember what I just said? Your connection to Raquel Alucard is fading... Her existence is gradually merging with me. ...Heh, the benefits you received from her were not limited to just your right arm, you foolish trash."

The grandiose voice spoke the truth. Naoto would have been dead without Raquel's help. Thanks to her, he had gained an arm made of her blood and the regenerative abilities of an immortal body. If that connection was gone, then Naoto was no longer immortal. The unhealable wound and the lost leg meant a severance from Raquel.

"It can't be..." Crawling on the cold ground, Naoto pressed his hands down and forced himself to rise, despite the pain. Just because his connection to Raquel was weak—no, precisely because it was weak—he couldn't just lie there like this.

There were many things he had received from Raquel. His right arm was one. His resilient body was another. But more than anything, he had been given life. As long as Naoto existed, the connection between him and Raquel had not been severed.

Naoto was still alive. Until that connection faded, struggling and fighting back was the least a "servant" could do in return for the precious "master" who had shared such a grand thing as life. It was a troublesome situation—like an accident waiting to happen, filled with various troublesome conditions— but thanks to Raquel, Naoto could still be "Naoto Kurogane" today, just like yesterday.

As long as they were connected, he should be able to pull her back.

"Uoooooooooh!"

Forcing his separated body to move, Naoto planted his feet on the ground. He pushed his heavy body up with his left arm. But that arm was suddenly seized by a pitch-black jaw with sharp fangs.

It was too late by the time he realized it, and Naoto collapsed into a pool of his own blood. He felt nauseous from the smell of his own blood. He tried to get up, but there were no more arms to support him. The right arm was gone from under his shoulder, and the left arm was gone from under his elbow, and neither would respond to Naoto's will.

Struggling without arms in the red puddle, Naoto was like a fish washed up on the beach.

"Hmm. You've become quite the sight. Like a dying caterpillar," Spinner said dismissively. At his feet, skeletal legs made dry sounds as they rearranged themselves. Naoto, forgetting his screams, could only expel harsh, ragged breaths. He didn't know which of his senses was in pain. He could feel himself rapidly weakening. But he was still alive.

"Raquel... give her back..."

Gritting his teeth, Naoto tried to keep his consciousness from fading as he struggled in the blood. Spinner looked down at him coldly.

"What a pathetic sight... To think this is the man Raquel Alcard presented to me as a condition. Understand this with your own body. You are nothing more than living trash, writhing at my feet, waiting to be discarded."

Spinner frowned as if looking at filth, and a needle formed at the corner of his mouth where the tattoo was. A muddy shadow stretched from beneath the bony spider legs that tapped on the ground, wrapping around Naoto's remaining left ankle. It tightened with a relentless force, binding him like garbage.

"You lowly sinner," it hissed, "this is your punishment."

Lifting him high enough for their gazes to meet, Spinner leaned in to look at Naoto's bloodied and tormented face.

"For you, a mere piece of filth, to have spoken to and touched the one chosen by the Azure... it is a defilement, a sin." The shadow tightened its grip around Naoto's ankle, the bones creaking under the pressure. "Every breath you've taken while associating with Raquel Alucard is a stain upon existence. Don't expect a quick death. No, you will witness everything... the fulfillment of my lifelong ambition to reach the Azure's wisdom, and the slow decay of your own powerlessness."

As soon as Spinner finished speaking, Naoto's body, held taut by the shadow, was violently swung from side to side. With a force that seemed more playful than lethal, he was slammed into the hard floor.

A pool of blood splattered across Naoto's face, staining it crimson. He was lifted again, blood dripping from his matted hair. This time, he was flung sideways, crashing into a makeshift scaffolding. The impact caused the pipes to buckle, striking his back and head, but the pain was almost nonexistent.

The back of his head felt numb, and his vision blurred. He couldn't comprehend his situation.

(What does he mean, "witness everything"?)

Naoto muttered weakly in his flickering consciousness. He felt like he was about to die.

The black vortex that was swirling beside Spinner, like an entrance to something, had somehow grown much larger. He wondered if this was the "lifelong ambition" that Spinner was talking about.

If this torture continued, Naoto doubted he would survive long enough to see the portal fully open.

(No, I have to do something. I have to save Raquel.)

But as he thought these words, his consciousness slipped away into darkness.

—

A voice.

Deep within his sinking consciousness, Naoto heard a voice calling out from somewhere.

It was that voice. The voice of the man he didn't know, who had suddenly asked him such an intrusive question.

"What now?" Naoto thought. He wondered if the man was going to complain about him being worthless.

That's right. What a sight I'm in. Sinking into a swamp of consciousness without sensation, Naoto mocks himself. He was weak. Overwhelmingly so. He couldn't even save the girl who had tried to help him, and now he was being hacked to pieces.

"I don't want to end like this..." he muttered.

A voice seemed to be asking something. But perhaps he was losing himself even within his own consciousness, for he couldn't understand what was being said. He couldn't hear.

"But, yeah," Naoto thought with a mind as frayed as thread. "If someone's going to save me... if they're going to let me stand again... and if they're going to give me enough strength to beat the crap out of that annoying bug-man, I'll gladly take whoever's hand, no matter who they are. I would never want it to end like this."

Though he didn't say it out loud, he felt like screaming these words into the darkness. At that moment, someone's consciousness suddenly drew near. He felt like he was being pulled towards it, so strongly that he thought he was hallucinating. But he wasn't.

As the presence of whoever it was drew closer, a pair of pitch-black arms extended from the depths of the darkness, where even his own form was invisible, and struck Naoto's chest with a heavy thud.

With that impact, Naoto woke up. His body jolted, trembling. Spinner, who was about to slam him to the ground, stopped in surprise.

The transformation began immediately. The blood that had been steadily dripping from Naoto's severed left arm and right leg stopped. In its place, a dark substance began to ooze out.

The rough, black mist, like a mass of shadows, smoothly and unhesitatingly shaped itself as if it were pouring water into a predetermined groove. The darkness rapidly solidified into an arm. Then, the damaged leg was restored.

"What the..." Spinner gasped in bewilderment. As if hearing that voice, Naoto's eyes snapped open. But they were not the usual soft, brownish black he was born with. They were red, as if blood had dripped into them and stained them a different color. As if seeping in, the blood-soaked black hair turned white.

Naoto's body moved. A realization struck him with the clarity of a taut string. Suspended in mid-air, he folded his body and sprang up. Grasping the viscous shadow that clung to his ankle with his newly revived hand, he pulled with all his might. With a sound like clay tearing, the shadow snapped.

Having forcefully gained his freedom, Naoto flipped his body a short distance to the ground and landed gracefully on his hands like a cat. A black insect flew out from Spinner's shadow, aiming for a landing. The insect bared its sharp fangs, intent on claiming Naoto's newly revived arm.

But Naoto crushed the insect with a single punch, his arm moving like a spring. Rising as if propelled by the impact, he closed the distance without hesitation.

Naoto's foot, launched high into the air, came crashing down onto Spinner's shoulder. Spinner, unable to counter a blow with the force of a swinging axe, stumbled back a few steps, dragging his spider-like legs.

With only a slight distance between them, Naoto swung his arms wide and pulled them back forcefully. A dark red substance gathered in the palm of his outstretched hand. Its viscous texture closely resembled the blood that had been spewing from Naoto's shoulder and thigh moments earlier.

—

The trembling red creates a long, slender handle, at the end of which resides a large blade. A big scythe was born. Naoto's pitch-black arm grabbed the handle.

"Blood Edge..." Spinner's mouth uttered in astonishment, as if in disbelief at what he was seeing.

True to its name, what Naoto held was indeed a blade of blood.

A blood-soaked blade.

In the next moment, faster than a blink, Naoto's scythe flashed. The scythe, arcing through the air, plunged deep into Spinner's body, slicing through flesh and bone in one swift motion. The

sound of breath escaping burst out of the black man's chest. Dragging a wet sound, the sickle forcefully scattered the blackened blood around it.

One more strike. And another. And another. The sickle repeated its slashes, mercilessly cutting apart Spinner, or what was left of it.

With yet another slash, Spinner was forcefully pushed back, his body staggering and retreating. All but three of the eight bone legs that supported its body were shattered, spread out like broken pieces.

"Ga... ah..."

His body, carved up by countless intersecting wounds, was so mutilated that it was a wonder it still retained a human form. It was spewing an enormous amount of blood, staining his white hands.

Spinner's blood was pitch black. The soot-like blood flowed down its misshapen lower limbs, staining even the shattered bone legs. He could neither unleash insects nor manipulate shadows. The fierce assault, surpassing any movements a human could make, embodied the phrase "faster than the eye could track," leaving Spinner no room for resistance.

What had changed this powerless boy? Spinner couldn't comprehend it. It was incomprehensible.

Before Spinner, still unable to fully accept the mercilessness that had befallen him, Naoto leaped lightly, closing the distance in an instant.

Black arm, black leg, white hair, red eyes.

"...Be devoured by the darkness..." With a thin opening, a feeling emerges, whispering softly. In response to that whisper, Naoto, who had seemed possessed and expressionless until then, felt a spark of emotion ignite within him.

"You... bastard!" His eyes widened in rage, and a feral killing intent filled him. With a mighty swing, his scythe sliced through the night in a crimson arc. The blade plunged deep into the black man's flesh, tearing him open.

"Gah, gah, aaaah, aaah!" Spinner let out a distorted scream. But Naoto paid no attention to the sound or the dark blood splattering onto him. Discarding the bloody scythe, he thrust his arm into the gaping hole in Spinner's body.

What he found was not the flesh or bone of a living being, but a deep, pure black darkness. And so, Naoto understood immediately.

Raquel is in there.

For a brief moment, he felt the sensation of flesh, but soon his arm was submerged in an unfathomable darkness. Naoto, undeterred, rummaged through the depths of the darkness, which was clearly deeper than the thickness of Spinner's body, searching for his goal.

From the writhing body of Spinner, shadowy arms extended, grasping Naoto's arm and shoulder. Instead of tearing him away, the countless arms attempted to pull him deeper into the fissure.

Struggling against the desperate force, he continued to push his arm further inside. At last, the sensation of smooth fabric brushed against his fingertips.

(There!)

For just a fleeting moment, he made contact, but he wouldn't let it slip away. Naoto sank deeper, submerging his shoulder into Spinner, and desperately reached out to embrace what he had touched. The familiar texture of a slender, delicate waist. In the clinging, swamp-like darkness, Naoto held it tightly to his chest.

"Raquel! ...Come out, Raquel!" He shouted, shaking her violently. With a savage force, he tore away the shadow-arms that clung to his hair, clothes, and arms. Then, with all his might, he pulled himself free. "I won't let you take her!"

With all his strength, Naoto kicked fiercely at Spinner with his remaining leg.



Raquel watched.

She listened. She felt.

She sensed everything happening around her with all five senses.

The strength of the voice calling her, the warmth of the arms holding her... she felt it all.

Darkness.

Recognition.

In the enclosed darkness, "Raquel Alucard", whose self-awareness was becoming hazy, was forcibly dragged out and saw the moon in the sky with her own eyes.

It was a beautiful full moon.

At that moment, she was certain.

She had definitely chosen "him."

For a brief moment, he thought he had lost consciousness. But Naoto realized it was not so when he was startled by his own ridiculously noisy breathing.

"Ha, ha... ze, ha... zee, ze... ha, ha, ha, ha..." There was no way his breath would calm down at such an absurd pace. Contrary to his oddly calm thoughts, his body was desperately trying to take in oxygen, his shoulders heaving up and down.

Naoto was almost touching the ground but was slightly raised, in a crouched position. His body was heavy, his senses were dull, and he felt an overwhelming sense of fatigue, as if his whole body had come apart at the seams. Nevertheless, he knew he was alive. Could there be such a suffocating death?

Gradually, his body remembered how to breathe properly. As the tense muscles slowly relaxed... Naoto realized that a golden-haired girl was in his arms. It was Raquel.

He let out a sigh of relief. He could see a number above her head. A number in the tens of millions, overwhelmingly lower than usual, but she was definitely alive.

"...You look terrible." Raquel stirred slightly in Naoto's arms and opened her eyes slowly. She looked up at him with her large golden eyes and blinked once. He could clearly see her long eyelashes fluttering up and down like a doll's. And those were her first words after being saved. Naoto burst out laughing.

"You're one to talk."

Raquel was a mess, covered in Naoto's blood, Spinner's blood, and the insect's bodily fluids. The tattered ribbon still held her hair in place, but it was not neat.

Raquel sighed wearily. Gently pushing Naoto's chest, she staggered to her feet and looked down at the body that had just been holding her.

"I can say this much: I'm doing far better than you."

"Ah..." Naoto, upon looking at himself again, groaned softly. It was indeed a horrific sight. The left arm and right leg, which had been replaced by something black until just a moment ago, had completely vanished without a trace. As if to compensate, his right arm, created from Raquel's blood, had somehow returned to normal.

"Of course. Your right arm was lost because I was consumed by Spinner. It returned when you brought me back," Raquel explained. At the same time, Naoto's regeneration ability had also returned.

However, the injuries he had sustained while Raquel was absorbed by Spinner could not be healed even by his regeneration. When the connection to Raquel was severed, Naoto had been just a "normal human." Wounds from that time would not regenerate, just as his lost right arm had not returned when he first encountered Spinner's Apostle.

"That's right, Spinner!" At the mention of the name, Naoto jumped up as if he had been shocked. But the right arm he tried to use to support himself couldn't bear his weight, and it twitched and shook as he raised his upper body, unable to push himself up any further.

Instead of Naoto, Raquel turned around, staggering slightly. Through her, Naoto saw the crouched figure of a black-clad man.

".....What the...?" Naoto's expression twisted in shock. Could he really call what was there—no, *who* was there—Spinner Superior? The man's spider-like lower limbs were melting away, resembling overcooked flesh, and he was slumped against the ground. At the center, the man in black was curled up, hugging himself. With bony, thin shoulders, elongated arms, unnaturally pale skin, and tousled gray hair, he bore the unmistakable features of Spinner.

But his body was writhing strangely, as if countless insects were rampaging inside him. Arms, chest, back, it didn't matter. Ignoring the positions of his joints and organs, his body was twisting and distorting its shape, as if it had lost all flesh and bone and become a mass of protoplasm.

"Gu, ooooo... oooOOooooOOoh!"

A cry, sounding more like a vengeful spirit than a sound produced by a human throat, echoed through the area. It was a cry of agony.

Spinner's body trembled violently, beginning to collapse. It resembled a dry sand dune being gradually eroded by the wind. His crumbling body was being sucked into the black vortex that still lingered behind him, turning into fine black dust.

"He's losing control." Raquel muttered in a voice somewhere between pity and contempt. "What he was trying to open was a gate to another space-time called the 'Boundary'. But that could only happen because he had absorbed me... After you forcibly pulled me away from Spinner, he lost control of the gate he was trying to open, and now his existence will be consumed."

If that happened, there would be no one to save him. Even though Naoto didn't fully understand Raquel's words, that was the part that left the strongest impression on him.

As if he had heard their conversation, Spinner raised his head, stretching his neck.

Naoto's breath caught slightly.

It was undoubtedly Spinner's face that was raised. But his body was already so black it was that the line between clothing and flesh was indistinguishable, and only his face stood out strangely white, as if a white mask had been fitted onto a black, amorphous body.

The hands, white and untouched by darkness, reached out, dragged by arms that were elongated and stretched even further. The mass of shadow undulated and moved forward in a grotesque manner, neither human legs nor spider legs propelling him.

"Return... Azure." The cursed, pleading voice, like the scream before, was distorted, muddy, and twisted, unlike Spinner's original voice. "Return... return, return, it's mine, my Azure..." While calling out 'Azure', Spinner stared at Raquel with clouded eyes.

They were not far enough apart. Raquel instinctively took a step back from the approaching Spinner. However, when her small hand touched Naoto, who couldn't stand, she briefly turned back, a determined look on her face, and faced the grotesque man again, standing up as if propelled by a spring.

Although she wasn't as intimately connected as Naoto, she must have been quite weakened. But she stood in front of Naoto like a wall, protecting him.

"Are you crazy? Just run away!" Naoto shouted, realizing that Raquel was the one being targeted.

Without looking back at him, Raquel maintained a confident expression and snapped her fingers. "Don't underestimate me... A single sorcerer on the verge of losing his self-awareness—there's nothing to worry about."

"That's a lie! Quit screwing around, just fly off and escape—!" Naoto shouted, but deep down, he understood that the reason she wasn't doing that was because she didn't have the strength left to do so.

Spinner's body shook violently. Prompted by the tremors racing up from his feet to his entire body, his form expanded grotesquely. From within his body, whose thickness was hard to define, something like ribs burst outward, opening as if splashing muddy water.

Was it his arms spreading wide, or the gaping maw of his sin? The exposed bones extended like silver-tipped blades, quivering in ecstasy as if to devour something.

"Devour, devour, devour, devour, devour, devour, devour, devour! The key to the Azure... my key... To the profound depths of noble knowledge, don't touch those hands, filthy blood, tainting the Azure... My hands are the rightful bearer of Azure... My Azure... Azure, Azure, Azure, ahh... Aah, aaah, aaah... At the end of the endless cycle, I shall create the truth before my eyes!"

Spouting incomprehensible words in a strangely broken voice, Spinner lunged at Raquel and Naoto. Raquel braced herself, pushing both hands forward. She summoned the wind. But only a weak wind gathered.

With a swift kick, Spinner dispersed the tiny gust of resistance and exposed his rib-like fangs...

But his predatory attack was halted by countless swords that seemed to appear from nowhere.

"Gaaaahhhh!" Swords with a white phosphorescence rained down on Spinner from all directions, sewing his deformed black body to the gray floor. A heavy, wet sound splattered disgustingly, and a similar scream escaped from Spinner's contorted mouth. His fingers, now thin like bones, trembled with fury as he raised his neck, looking up to the sky.

"Co... come, Mosaic..." Spinner called out, black blood bubbling at the corner of his mouth. At the sound of his voice, Naoto and Raquel also looked towards the sky.

In the bright night sky with a round moon floating, Kiiro Hikagami was floating with her long golden hair swaying. But her appearance was quite different from the one Naoto and the others knew.

Her hair, which was always neatly tied up for easy movement, flowed down her back, creating a more glamorous look than intellectual. She wasn't wearing the slender glasses she usually did. There was no tight skirt or sexy suit that drew attention to her figure. Instead, she wore a full-body suit primarily in white and yellow, tightly hugging her form.

It looked almost like armor, with several metallic parts attached to it. Particularly striking were the large pieces on her arms and legs, which resembled the swords that had just been fired at Spinner.

In a word, her appearance was bizarre.

If not for Kiirō's face above her neck, one might think she was a robot from some science fiction movie.

From a position higher than Naoto and Spinner, Kiirō looked down at Spinner, her crimson-purple eyes clearly burning with killing intent.

"I won't allow you to touch Naoto-kun with your filthy hands anymore." She said it with a piercing coldness.

Even though the words weren't directed at them, the tone of her voice sent a chill through the air. More than the coldness in her voice, the murderous intent contained within it stirred a primal fear, as if their very lives were being threatened.

But Spinner seemed to pay no attention to Kiirō's piercing gaze or cold voice. He contorted his face into a grimace and scratched at his chest, letting out a guttural, gurgling sound from his throat. His expression was far removed from the grotesque figure he had been just a moment ago. It was doubtful if there was any reason left in Spinner, who was turning into this blackened mass.

Spinner let out a muffled, strangled cry, reaching out to grab Kiirō, who hovered in the air above him.



However, as Spinner tried to rise higher, Kihiro grimaced in disgust and thrust out her arm, adorned with a sword-like part.

The space around her rippled like the surface of water. From within, swords cloaked in white light appeared. The light swords descended upon Spinner in the same way as before, but this time in more than double the number.

The heavy, wet sound of many layers of blades overlapping drowned out Spinner's final screams. Bathed in swords from all sides, Spinner hesitated, remaining in place for a moment. But finally, as though he could no longer resist, his body was pulled strongly backward.

The black vortex created by Spinner—the portal that should have led to the "Boundary"—was now waiting for the wizard consumed by his runaway magic.

"Gi... aa, aA... Aaah...!" Spinner screeched with a meaningless, strained voice as he was sucked into the distortion he had created, disappearing. The portal shrank, and eventually, without a sound, it vanished. Only the scattered dark blood remained, like the ashes of Spinner, and the surroundings became eerily quiet.

"Ha..." Without realizing it, his breath had stopped, and Naoto slumped his shoulders, letting out a breath that had been trapped in his chest. His strength drained away, and the right arm he had been using to support himself gave out. Sliding his head along the concrete, Naoto collapsed onto his back.

"Ah... enough... It's over, it's over..." He muttered words that even he didn't quite understand.

Looking up at the sky, Naoto found Kihiro in her strange outfit. As their eyes met, Kihiro frowned painfully and descended towards Naoto.

"Naoto-kun..."

Kneeling beside him, Kihiro leaned forward, cupping his face with her bodysuit-covered hands.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry I took so long... Oh, you've been so hurt... If I had gotten here sooner, I could have... I could have stopped all this...!" Her voice trembled emotionally, her face on the verge of tears. Finally, as if overwhelmed, she pulled Naoto's head tightly against her chest.

The feeling of her soft breasts against the bodysuit was vivid. Naoto unconsciously pushed Kihiro's body away with more force than necessary.

"Hey, let go, calm down... ... I'm glad you came, but we can do that later..."

"No. I can't do it later." Kiiro firmly rejected Naoto's soothing offer, as if discarding her previous attitude. She turned her head to the side, and her gaze stopped when it landed on Raquel. Her eyes, staring fixedly, were filled with a harsh reproach.

"Raquel Alucard..." Raquel, who had been silent until then, stiffened at the low, threatening tone of Kiiro's voice. She flinched, as if trying to escape, and her gaze dropped to the floor.

Kiiro stood up, glaring at Raquel with overwhelming intensity. She extended her arm, and the sword-like parts attached to her arm were pointed directly at Raquel's neck. The sharp tip, more dangerous than it appeared, was aimed precisely at Raquel's throat.

"I can't overlook this any longer. You are going to make Naoto-kun unhappy... make him suffer, hurt him..."

"I..." Raquel inhaled sharply as Kiiro's words, as sharp as the point of a blade, were thrust at her. She lifted her gaze, which she had once averted, and locked eyes with Kiiro. From her eyes, tone, and most of all, the murderous intent that was in no way concealed, Raquel could feel exactly what Kiiro was about to say.

"You can't protect Naoto-kun. If that's the case, then I will... I will protect Naoto-kun. I'll kill you and make Naoto-kun mine!"

"Wh-what are you talking about! You can't just..." Naoto couldn't finish his words.

Without even turning to acknowledge Naoto's plea, Kiiro extended her arm and summoned countless swords around her. They were the same swords she had used to carve Spinner to pieces just moments ago.

"Hey, wait! Stop it!"

"Ugh..."

"I won't let you have Naoto Kurogane!" As Naoto struggled to get up, Raquel, despite her condition, braced herself. Even though she had no strength left to either receive or dodge the attack. At Kiiro's command, the swords were unleashed all at once. Multiple deaths tore through the cold air. A chill ran down Naoto's spine.

... And then, a soft, swaying night breeze cut between Kiiro and Raquel.

Suddenly appearing from the night, there was a man with long, glossy black hair reflecting the white moonlight and red eyes. With a single outstretched hand, he gently stopped all the swords that had been aimed at Raquel, and a faint smile appeared on his lips.

Kihiro's eyes widened in astonishment at his appearance. His appearance was something she had never anticipated, not even in the slightest. A sharp breath escaped her, and her voice trembled, her round eyes betraying her disbelief.

"Clavis... Alucard..."

It was the name of the monster among monsters that the Mitsurugi Agency, to which Kihiro belonged, had been hunting for years. Despite searching high and low, they had never been able to track his movements, and just recently, two mercenaries they had hired at a high price had come into contact with him—only to return with no useful information, having failed to capture him.

And here he was, blatantly revealing himself in front of her, calmly accepting her attacks without any resistance. The surprise disoriented Kihiro, and her disorientation silenced her.

"That's enough, Kihiro Hikagami." Clavis spoke softly, as if scolding a child for a pointless prank.

Even though Raquel and Kihiro were both beautiful women, each with their own charm, Clavis's overwhelming beauty and the irresistible aura of his demonic power shifted the balance of the situation. With just those few words, he became the true master of the scene.

Clavis waved his hand lightly, as if dismissing the incoming swords. With a casual gesture, all the swords that Kihiro had summoned dissipated into fine particles of light.

"Naoto Kurogane would be sad if this continued."

"You seem confident. Do you understand your position, Clavis Alucard?"

In response to his gentle, yet deadly tone, Kihiro shot back, her words sharp as she tried to shake off her unease. She slid back slightly, her feet barely touching the ground, and took up a defensive stance, ready to strike with the swords in her arms at a moment's notice.

"You are a target for extermination by the Mitsurugi Agency. I can't let you go here!" That was Kihiro's mission, and the mission of the Mitsurugi Agency to which she belonged.

But Clavis seemed uninterested in the sharp needle pointed at him, and he squinted his eyes sharply, twisting his lips somewhat sarcastically.

"It seems you're mistaken. The one who should be letting go... is you," the vampire, who reigned over the moonlight with such sweetness, threatened Kihiro. "If you want to die in vain, I don't mind granting your wish, but I refuse to lay a hand on the one taking care of my daughter. I will not ask you to disappear. Put away your weapons."

At those words, Kiiko hesitated, her gaze wandering uncertainly. She eventually looked at Naoto, and her expression softened slightly.

"...Fine. But this is the only time I'll follow your orders." She muttered reluctantly. With a resigned sigh, Kiiko lowered her eyelids. At that signal, the metal armor attached to her arms and legs disengaged.

The pieces of armor that had been attached to Kiiko's body floated behind her, as if pulled by an invisible force, and merged into a single massive sword. This sword was her weapon in its dormant state, awaiting further use.

For now, she had no intention of fighting.

Seeing this, Raquel, who had held her ground until then, collapsed to her knees. She seemed unable to keep up with the series of events that had occurred, from Kiiko's appearance to Clavis's intrusion. With a somewhat dazed look, she stared at Naoto. Naoto looked back at her with a helpless smile.

Everyone was doing exactly what they wanted. But thanks to all that, it seemed he could finally get some rest.

He'd reached his limit.

Naoto let out a long breath, as if expelling it from his entire body, and let go of the thread of consciousness he had been holding onto for so long.

Just before his vision faded, Naoto clearly saw Raquel's awkward smile directed back at him.

Epilogue: Heartbeat

There was the scent of flowers.

Unfortunately, Naoto wasn't knowledgeable about flowers. It's not that he disliked them, but he wasn't interested enough to make an effort to remember their names.

So he had no idea which flower the scent belonged to... but it smelled nice. He wondered where the flowers might be, and slowly opened his eyes to look around.

"...Huh? What's this?"

What he saw was an unfamiliar sight, and Naoto began to turn his head, looking for what he assumed should be the familiar scene of his own room.

The first thing he saw was the ceiling. White, with long fluorescent lights that looked like the ones in school, looking down at him. It felt almost like a hospital. The sensation of the bed was also different from usual, and Naoto, with a foggy head, tilted his neck in confusion as he looked for his alarm clock.

Then, someone suddenly pressed down on his shoulder.

"Nao-kun!!!" The voice that pierced through his sleepy thoughts made Naoto snap awake, his mind suddenly clearing.

Haruka's face filled his vision. Had she been crying? Her eyes were red and swollen, and the healthy pink that usually colored her cheeks was slightly pale.

That's right, Naoto understood his situation.

This was a hospital, not that it looked like one. It was only natural.

Naoto clearly remembered the moment when he lost consciousness on the rooftop of the construction building. He remembered the situation, how it had happened, and while not every detail was crystal clear, he could recall enough. If he had been left there, there was no doubt he would have died.

It was probably either Kiirō, Raquel, or the Mitsurugi Agency, or maybe even Clavis who had gotten him to the hospital.

Then, thinking about how Haruka and Yuki must have been contacted afterward, a wave of guilt hit Naoto, along with a sense of awkwardness and embarrassment that was almost unbearable.

"...G-Good morning." Not knowing what to say, Naoto said this to Haruka, who was looking up at him pleadingly. Suddenly, tears began to well up in Haruka's eyes. Before the first drop could fall on Naoto's stiff face, Haruka pressed her forehead against his chest and buried her face.

"It's not good morning, you idiot!" She said with a tearful voice, and then, unable to form any clear words, Haruka burst into tears like a child. Behind Haruka, by the side of the hospital room door, stood Raquel. Surprised by Haruka's sudden outburst, she took a step forward to try to calm her down, but unsure of what to do next, she looked to Naoto for help.

Seeing Raquel's lost, little animal-like eyes, Naoto couldn't help but burst out laughing. Raquel's eyebrows furrowed in disapproval. But then she soon slumped her shoulders and let out a sigh of relief. Seeing this, Naoto too let out a deep breath of relief.

For now, it seemed that both he and Raquel had managed to get through that full moon night safely.

On a small chest next to the bed, a delicate heart-shaped object was placed, surrounded by flowers—most likely Haruka's taste. Through the square window beyond, the clear blue sky of a crisp autumn day could be seen.

...That was about an hour ago.

After being soothed by Naoto and Raquel, who had been reluctantly dragged into the situation by Naoto's summons, Haruka had eventually stopped crying after some time.

From what Naoto had heard, he had been involved in a massive land subsidence accident and was brought in unconscious, in critical condition. According to the doctor Haruka had called, he needed to be hospitalized for a few more days to observe his condition. Since he would need clothes and personal items, Haruka decided to go back to her apartment to fetch his things. She also arranged to contact Yuki, who had gone off to work, despite her worry.

Haruka said she would buy some cream puffs on her way back, and with a smile, she finally left the hospital room.

Afterwards, a female nurse came and explained the basics of hospital life, such as where the bathroom was, the hours of the shop, how to use the call button, and meal times. Once the basic procedures were done, Naoto sighed, trying to refocus his mind.

It was quiet outside the room, with barely a sound of footsteps passing by. Perhaps the room was located at the far end of the ward. After waiting about ten minutes to see if any doctors or other nurses would come in to replace the previous one, Naoto glanced back at Raquel, who was sitting in a metal chair by the bed.

".....Can I ask you something?" He remembered everything up until he lost consciousness, but after that, his memory was completely blank. He could make guesses, but they would only be guesses. Raquel gave a graceful nod, as if saying she understood. Naoto responded with a quiet "Alright."

"I don't know where to start... First of all, what about Saya?" He hadn't had the time to worry about Saya since he had rescued her from Spinner's insect. He felt ashamed of himself for fainting while leaving his unconscious sister behind.

Raquel shook her head, her golden hair swinging like a ribbon in its usual ponytail.

"I don't know. By the time we carried you out, Saya was already gone. When you pulled me out of Spinner, she was still lying unconscious... I think she must have regained consciousness when either my father or Kiirō arrived and then left," Raquel explained.

"I see. Well, it's much better than finding her dead body," Naoto replied, seemingly unconcerned. Inwardly, he was grateful to Raquel for her broad, calm perspective when she had checked for Saya's presence right after being pulled from Spinner. He hadn't even looked back to check himself.

The worst-case scenario would've been that Saya was unknowingly killed by Clavis in his pursuit of Soul Eater. At least that disaster had been avoided. He could count his blessings, even if it didn't entirely put his mind at ease.

"And what about Spinner?"

"It's gone. There wasn't a body left, so there's no physical evidence, but his soul and existence were drawn into the Boundary and consumed. It got sucked into the 'Gate to the Boundary' that it had opened..."

"The Boundary...?" Naoto began to ask, but he stopped mid-sentence. His intuition told him that it was a complicated subject he didn't want to get into. He suddenly remembered Clavis's words, *"You don't need to understand the rules of the outside world."* This was exactly the kind of thing he meant.

Until he needed to understand, he would just think of it as something that Spinner was obsessed with. It didn't matter if he didn't understand it. It had no impact on his current situation.

There was one more urgent thing he wanted to ask.

"Then what about this?" Naoto asked, lifting his arm. His left arm. "Why... do I still have an arm and a leg?"

Under the white-covered blanket, his right leg was also casually thrown out.

He remembered the morning after he first met Raquel. Even then, the arm that had been taken by the insect was attached to Naoto's right shoulder as if nothing had happened.

However, there was a big difference this time.

The arm Raquel had created from her own blood had moved according to Naoto's will from the start. It had been so perfectly functional that he almost wondered if the insect-gnawed arm had been a dream. But the left arm and right leg he had now, while they could be moved, didn't respond as smoothly or naturally.

He glanced at Raquel, silently asking if she was the one responsible for this. She understood the unspoken question and shook her head.

"As for the arm and leg... you should ask her, not me. She should be here soon." Raquel said, and then, she glanced toward the door behind her.

At that moment, there was a light knock on the hospital room door. It seemed Raquel had already noticed the approaching footsteps and the person who was coming.

"Yes?"

When Naoto called out, the door hesitated for a moment before slowly opening.

It was Kiiro who entered. She was wearing bright pink lipstick, had done her makeup subtly, and had tied her golden hair up in a high ponytail.

With her appearance, she looked like a very beautiful and somewhat dubious career woman. It was hard to believe that she was the same woman in the bodysuit on that moonlit night.

Instead of her usual sexy suit that showed off the lines of her body, Kiiro was wearing a thick long coat that covered her from head to toe.

Swinging the hem of her long coat heavily, Kiiro walked to the opposite side of the bed, avoiding Raquel, and looked down at Naoto with a wry smile.

"You're awake. That's good."

Naoto felt a sense of unease at her attitude and hesitated. This wasn't like her. There was none of her usual, overwhelming self-assertion, the kind that paid no mind to others' discomfort. The way she was speaking to him, almost as if she were apologetic, made Naoto suspicious.

"Did you... put these arms and legs on me?"

"I arranged for it, but I didn't actually prepare the limbs or perform the procedure. Even the current Mitsurugi Agency doesn't have the technology to create such precise human limbs."

"Then who did?"

It wasn't Raquel or Kiiro. For a moment, Clavis came to mind, but Naoto quickly dismissed that thought. If Clavis had created the limbs, they would have been working smoothly without any issues, and Raquel's reaction would be more dissatisfied.

The name Kiiro mentioned next took Naoto aback.

"I think you know, Naoto-kun. The one who created and attached your arms and legs was Relius Clover."

"Relius!?" Thinking that was absurd, Naoto looked at Raquel. Raquel nodded in affirmation.

"It may feel strange now, but in a few days, it should become integrated with your body and you'll be able to move it without any problems. It will be inconvenient until then, but please bear with it."

"Hey, who do you think you are, just doing whatever you want? Is this really okay?"

"It's fine. I haven't done anything strange. Don't worry."

"‘Don't worry’... I don't think I can do that."

Staring intently at his left arm, Naoto couldn't help but voice his inner thoughts. The man with the dark belt covering his eyes, the strange and calculating man, flashed into his mind. He didn't know him well, but he had been saved by him in a dangerous situation once. Still, the thought of *being at ease* around that man didn't sit well with him.

With a stiff expression, Naoto looked at Raquel. Raquel, who had unknowingly tensed up in the folding chair, noticed his gaze. Even so, she stubbornly avoided looking at Kiiro and opened her mouth.

"I don't feel anything strange. It's true that there's no tampering."

"Well, if you say so..."

If Raquel says so, it probably wasn't some huge bomb implanted into him. Even if it was a small bomb that Raquel couldn't detect, it would be nothing compared to the inconvenience of not having arms or legs.

The arm that Relius had made, while not as familiar as the one Raquel had given him, was a marvelous piece of work. The texture of the skin, the sensation of touch—it was no different from his original arm. There were no visible stitches, and he couldn't tell where his own arm ended just by looking at it.

Just who was that man? He wondered, gazing intently at his arm. Here was a normal arm, made of flesh and bone. It wasn't a prosthetic. How in the world could he have created something like this?

"There's one more thing I need to tell you today," Kiiro said in a formal tone, gently pushing Naoto's question aside. She sounded a little tense. Naoto looked up, wondering why she would be nervous.

Kiiro placed her hand gently over her chest, which was visibly full even through her coat, and took a deep breath. Then, with that same hand, she began to unbutton her coat. He immediately understood what she was about to do.

Naoto's eyes widened in surprise, and he turned his head away sharply.

Naked.

Kiiro was naked. She wasn't wearing anything under her coat.

"What are you doing? Put your clothes on..."

"Look, Naoto-kun," Kiiro invited softly. There was nothing but the usual seductive temptation in her voice. "...Look closely."

Her voice, which would usually be seductive, was strangely serious. Naoto hesitated, still unsure, but awkwardly turned his head back toward her.

Kiiro had completely discarded her coat, and what was revealed was a body that was—at first glance—striking.

Her body was not unblemished. In fact, it was the opposite. Her body was covered in scars—huge, noticeable surgical scars that Naoto couldn't help but stare at in disbelief. On her upper arms, shoulders, ankles, and thighs. There were diagonal scars running across her torso, as if her body had been severed and then put back together.

Along with the scars, Naoto's gaze was drawn to something else. On Kiiro's chest, just below her collarbone, was a strange mark. It looked like a brand that might be used to mark a product, and it was a number.

"Es No07" - that's what it said.

"I am the Dimensional Boundary Contact Prototype, EsNo07... a synthetic doll created by human hands."

"Wh... what are you talking about? Dimensional... what?"

"Dimensional boundary contact body."

Naoto didn't understand. He asked, his voice filled with confusion. Kiiro smiled lightly and corrected him, pronouncing the words slowly this time.

Her usual red-purple eyes, which often held a provocative glint, now had a trace of loneliness, and Kiiro narrowed her eyes slightly.

"Actually, there were many other dolls like me. But they were all broken. Some of them were eaten by Spinner's bugs and torn apart."

"Many." Naoto swallowed his confusion at the way she counted inanimate objects.

It was an unbelievable story. Kiiro obviously looked human, and she was nothing like the department store mannequins Naoto instinctively thought of when he heard the word *doll*.

He had touched her skin directly. Her colorful skin was warm to the touch, and he could feel her heart beating beneath her ample breasts.

Kiiro lifted her breast slightly and traced the surgical scar that ran diagonally across the bottom of her chest with her fingers.

"I was made by piecing together the bodies of my broken, dismembered sisters. Remember when Spinner called me a 'mosaic'? That's what it meant."

"I..."

"Don't feel sorry for me. I don't want to hear you say that, Naoto-kun. It would make me sad." Naoto had almost blurted out a word of comfort, but Kiiro quickly, yet gently, stopped him from speaking. "This is my request."

With that preface, Kiiro composed herself, her expression turning serious as she looked directly at Naoto.

"I... no, we were originally created to find and obtain the 'Azure'. We were forced to suspend our search for various reasons, but with the gate that Spinner opened... using that as a new clue, the Mitsurugi Agency is once again in pursuit of the 'Azure'."

Naoto heard Raquel gasp as he looked back at Kihiro. That sound told him that her story was very serious and entirely possible.

At the same time, Naoto realized that, despite having mentioned the Mitsurugi Agency many times, he didn't really understand what it was. What kind of organization was it, exactly? Who was in charge? Who gave the orders? He knew nothing.

Kihiro had said that the Mitsurugi Agency's purpose was to "uphold and manage the order of the human world." However, no one had ever said that this meant eliminating "threats" like Clavis.

"That's not all. The Mitsurugi Agency is gathering Drive users as a military force. Eventually, they plan to monopolize the Drive users, and anyone who doesn't comply with the Agency will be eliminated. Even you, Naoto-kun..."

"Blood Edge, right?" Naoto filled in the blank, referring to the name he had learned. Kihiro nodded slightly.

Naoto still didn't fully understand how to control it or what kind of power it was, but he could at least grasp that it was the name of his Drive.

It was that power that allowed him to defeat the massive insect sent by Isa and Spinner. It let him rescue Raquel from within Spinner.

An unknown power dormant within him, yet a valuable weapon for Naoto... Blood Edge.

Kihiro pressed her hand against her chest, where the numbered mark was.

"Naoto-kun. Come with me. If you need the 'Azure,' let's search for it together under the Mitsurugi Agency. If you stay like this, we'll end up as enemies. I'll have no choice but to eliminate you."

As a dangerous individual who didn't obey the institution and, at the same time, as an obstacle to obtaining the unique 'Azure,' his life would be in danger.

Kihiro didn't sound like she was threatening him. There were no hints of any schemes or manipulations behind her words. She was simply worried about him. She was convinced that joining the Mitsurugi Agency would be the way to save him.

Even though Naoto could sense that, he shook his head firmly without hesitation.

"I appreciate your concern, and I'm grateful for arranging the hospital and the arm... but I'm going to decline your offer. I won't join the Mitsurugi Agency." It was already a firm decision in Naoto's mind.

He found it a little strange himself. If he thought about it more calmly and objectively, it might be safer, easier, and more certain to join the Mitsurugi Agency. There was even the option to follow Clavis's lead, as he had suggested.

But no matter who offered him a different choice or in what words, Naoto didn't find it appealing.

(Is it because of the promise... that I made?)

He had promised to obtain the 'Azure'. It was the first promise he made to Raquel. It felt like a contract etched into his soul through the right arm that had been given to him.

He didn't feel cramped or dissatisfied with that promise. He just wanted to find the Azure with Raquel. That was the only reason. But for Naoto, it was a reason more important than anything else.

Kihiro stared at Naoto as if she wanted to say something, then let out a sigh of disappointment and slumped her shoulders.

"Alright... I understand. If you're going to say that, I'll step back quietly today." As if to prove her words, she fastened the front of her thick coat, hiding the countless stitching scars, her white skin, and the engraving on her chest. She adjusted the rim of her thin glasses with her fingertips, then flashed a seductive, almost playful smile.

"But I won't give up. I feel like you and I are bound by fate, Naoto-kun." After saying that, Kihiro blew a small kiss and left the hospital room. The sound of her high heels clicking on the floor quickly faded away.

As soon as the hospital room was filled with silence and stillness, Naoto and Raquel both exhaled deeply. Naoto did so with a sense of weariness at the increasingly complicated situation around him. Raquel did so because she was relieved of the tense atmosphere that had been created by Kihiro's presence.

Although they hadn't spent much time together, Naoto noticed that Raquel seemed visibly more tired now than she had been before Kihiro entered the room. He furrowed his brows and smiled wryly.

"You really don't change, do you...?"

Even though she had been living with Naoto for quite some time and had plenty of opportunities to interact with women, Raquel still couldn't have a proper conversation with anyone but Haruka. Even with Yuki, it was a bit rough.

With a confident look that was completely different from before, Raquel used her finger to tuck a short strand of hair from her ponytail behind her ear.

"Don't make it sound like such a big deal. It's just... I'm not good at it, okay?" She insisted.

"You should try to accept reality a little." Naoto said it casually, but he knew that Raquel wasn't the type to change her behavior, no matter what he said. He didn't have the energy to try and force her to adjust either.

Letting out a small sigh, Naoto pushed his legs closer to his chest and bent his knee. Since his right leg couldn't bend, it was only his left leg that moved. Come to think of it, out of all his limbs, only his left leg remained as his own. The rest—his arms and the other leg—were artificial.

"Hey, Raquel. Why..."

Naoto found himself gazing at his left leg through the blanket, lost in strange thoughts. He opened his mouth casually, then paused, realizing he wasn't sure whether he should ask, but decided to continue anyway.

"Why did you choose me?"

Raquel didn't seem particularly surprised by the question. She didn't seem troubled or displeased either. Instead, she stared at Naoto with her translucent eyes, looking deeply into his, as though peering into his very core.

Keeping her gaze fixed on him, Raquel lifted herself from her chair and gently placed her hand on Naoto's stomach. She leaned forward smoothly.

The white hand that had been placed on his stomach moved up over the blanket and onto Naoto's chest. With her other hand, she touched Naoto's shoulder, and then... with a quiet, emotionless expression, Raquel gently pressed her cheek against Naoto's chest.

"Hey..."

Raquel moved her body over Naoto's as he lay on the bed, and with a dreamy look in her eyes, she closed them.

"...I can hear the heartbeat of the *Azure* from you." She said softly, as if whispering to the heartbeat beneath her pressed ear.

"Huh?" Not understanding what she meant, Naoto furrowed his brows. She hadn't answered his earlier question either. But Raquel, with a playful, almost kitten-like gesture, gazed up at Naoto from his chest. She trapped his image in her large golden eyes and spoke in a soft, delicate voice.

"Naoto. Obtain the *Azure*. And then... take me..."

What Raquel said was neither an order nor a plea, but the promise they had made.

It was the promise made in the abandoned apartment complex under the moonlight. The collapsed buildings. The insects that had gnawed off his limbs, and the girl with golden eyes who looked down at Naoto, buried under debris.

The promise made between them, with her wearing nothing but a simple white dress and a black cloak, bathed in the moonlight.



Raquel continued weaving her words.

"Find me."

Naoto didn't ask *where*.

He didn't ask *how*.

Raquel spoke with a hint of uncertainty, and Naoto placed his hand gently on her head.

"I understand. Don't worry."

It might have been Raquel's way of deflecting. Naoto's question might have been something difficult for her to answer with words.

Or perhaps this was her answer. Knowing how awkward Raquel was, maybe this was all she could say.

In any case, Naoto thought, *it's fine*.

Under his hand, Raquel laughed softly, as though feeling a bit ticklish.

For now, that smile was enough.

Extra Chapter: Fragments

If the Azure weaves a story, it simultaneously unravels another.

This is a small fragment of a story that has been retold countless times. A delicate snag in a story that branches out in many directions. A faint splash of a story folded over in layers. A story that has many beginnings and many endings, yet is still intertwined in a complex way.

The hands of the clock turn slightly backward.

The full moon hung like a gaping hole in the night sky, which seemed to spread deep darkness.

It was around dinner time. Ignoring the busy flow of people, two men stood on the rooftop of an old apartment building near Shinkawahama Station.

One was a sharp-eyed man with a rough appearance and a sturdy build, wearing a stiff suit that didn't quite suit his menacing appearance. Valkenhayn Hellsing.

The other was a man with a refined physique, golden hair, and pale skin. However, his eyes were covered with a black band, creating a strange aura about him. This man was Relius Clover.

They were looking at a building under construction, two streets away. They were looking at the rooftop where construction scaffolding had been set up.

Until just a moment ago, a battle had secretly taken place there, one that would determine the boundary of the world and the fate of a young boy. But now the curtain had fallen, and the performers had left the stage. Now people from the Mitsurugi Agency gathered to clean up the mess.

Relius watched the scene for a while, then lost interest and looked away, his eyes covered by a black blindfold. His gaze drifted to the ground. There, lying at his feet, was a girl. She was dressed in a pale pink and purple kimono, her long hair sprawled out. She was unconscious, lying limply, and next to her lay the weapon she had used—a katana.

"...Kiiro has successfully installed the Murakumo Unit..." As he looked down at the limp girl, Relius muttered to himself. It was a comment not meant for anyone to hear, but even a single low, raspy word was enough to reach the beastman standing beside him. Valkenhayn frowned at the unfamiliar words and turned to Relius with a glare.

"Murakumo Unit? What's that?" He also wanted to ask why his partner had retrieved the girl lying at his feet, but he decided not to ask. He didn't think he would get a pleasant answer. Relius replied in a cool, emotionless voice. "A Sister Observer weapon... in other words, a weapon created to kill gods."

"Kill gods? What nonsense..." Valkenhayn snorted and turned his back to the building under construction. "Enough of this. Let's get out of here." Urged by the irritated voice, Relius also began to walk away.

But just then, the door to the rooftop forcefully swung open. A boy jumped out. He was tall and thin boy, probably around the same age as Naoto Kurogane. However, instead of the student uniform like Naoto, he was wearing a black suit similar to Relius'. He also wore a black hat that seemed to be tailored to match the suit.

"Ah, here you are. I've been looking for you, Relius Clover." As soon as he found Relius, the boy in the suit dramatically patted his chest. Neither Relius nor Valkenhayn knew the boy. But the fact that he knew their names made Valkenhayn step forward with caution.

"Who are you?" He asked, frowning suspiciously as he glared at the boy. The boy had a gentle-looking face. But the way he smiled, raising the corners of his mouth as he looked back at Valkenhayn, somehow gave an unsettling feeling.

"Ah, well... how should I put this? I was told by the Mitsurugi Agency in fall to follow Relius's instructions, but... wasn't that mentioned to you?" He tilted his head as if puzzled and raised both hands. Every gesture of his further irritated Valkenhayn. But Relius, on the other hand, was observing the boy intently through his belt, whether or not he was listening to the boy's story.

"Hmm... interesting form," he finally muttered.

"What is?" The boy asked, tilting his head to the other side, but Relius didn't answer. He appeared to be deep in his observations, and Valkenhayn let out a frustrated sigh.

Then, a muffled murmur reached the wolf's ears. The voice seemed to belong to the boy. But the voice was unusually low and seemed to carry an unsettling, ominous tone.

"Anyway, I've finally 'found you'..."

Whether or not Relius heard the boy's murmured words under his hat, he showed no concern as he spoke up.

"What's your name?"

The boy gave a weak, insincere smile. "Name... huh. Well, I don't really care about names."

Valkenhayn scowled at the boy's carefree expression. "Are you mocking us?"

"Not at all! Ah, right. Please, just call me..." He straightened up, a smile curling on his lips, and with a deep bow, he said, "Call me '*Hazama*'."

With that, the boy picked up his black hat and took a deep, clownish bowed bow.

This is a thread that was never meant to be written, woven between stories.

A summer inserted that only those who can see can see, and only those who know can know.

Somewhere that is not here... a distorted note of a disturbing overture that leads to another story of the Azure.

And the night of the full moon comes to an end.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up “*Bloodedge Experience*”. I am the author, Mako Komao.

First of all, this book is the second volume of a two-part series. If you've casually picked this up and are now reading the afterword, wondering what it's about, please take note that this is the second half of the story. I hope you can enjoy both volumes together!

Now, let me briefly explain the book.

This story shares the same underlying world as the 2D fighting game *BLAZBLUE*, which is published by Arc System Works. The producer of *BLAZBLUE* and the creator of the original plot and supervisor for this novel, Mr. Toshimichi Mori, wrote the outline, and I, Mako Komao, wrote the novel itself.

There are many connections between the game *BLAZBLUE* and *Bloodedge Experience*. So, for those of you who haven't played the game yet, I'd recommend experiencing the *Azure* storyline through the game as well. I'm sure you'll find a lot of fun moments!

Also, a novel series based on *BLAZBLUE* has been published by Fujimi Dragon Books, also written by me. If you're interested, I'd be thrilled if you check those out as well!

Now, let me take this time to share my thoughts about the creation of this book.

Bloodedge Experience is finally finished.

The concept for the story has actually been around for a long time. Mr. Mori told me his ideas a while ago, and I recently remembered how we were quietly talking about them over a meal. At that time, we didn't have the current setting yet, so it feels nostalgic to think back on those early days.

But when it came to actually writing, it was tough. Mr. Mori has a way of packing in so many exciting ideas—everything from the comedic elements to unexpected connections with the *BLAZBLUE* series.

I had to make sure none of those ideas got lost or overlooked, while juggling and writing them all down in an organized way. It was quite a challenge.

The inclusion of the protagonist's sister was one of the most unexpected elements. When I first received the plot for the first volume, I literally leaned forward in shock and asked, "What's going on here?"

There were moments like this throughout the process, and I'm sure readers who are familiar with the main *BLAZBLUE* story will find surprises and smirks as they enjoy these twists.

In fact, I can't help but think, *I really hope that's the case...* I've planted a lot of little details throughout the story, so I hope you'll enjoy them all.

Of course, while this novel is connected to the game, it is an independent story. You don't need to know the game in advance to understand or enjoy this book, so I would be happy if you could love it as its own unique tale.

By now, I'm sure you've already read the content of this book. How did you find it? Did you enjoy it?

As the writer, I can't express the emotions I felt in just one sentence. It was a lot of fun, and I was excited throughout the process. But there were times I struggled with how to write certain parts, and moments where I was frustrated with my own writing—like, *"Is this all you can do?!"* It's a bit of a tradition for me now to get angry with myself toward the end of the writing process.

Even so, I'm really relieved and happy to have come this far and be able to write this afterword. It feels like I've finished a huge task.

Still, now that it's over, it's a bit like leaving an amusement park at closing time—looking back at the beautiful night view and feeling that bittersweet sense of *"Ah... that was fun."*

Oh, by the way, this afterword is actually 8 pages long. That's pretty long, isn't it? My editor even laughed a bit when they saw how long it was, but it's just the page count. So, I'll continue writing freely for a little bit more, so please bear with me.

Now, I'd like to know, what characters or scenes did you enjoy the most? For me personally, I absolutely love the pair of Naoto and Raquel.

Well, actually, one of my long-time favorite characters, a certain "father," also makes an appearance in this novel. Every time I wrote his name, I couldn't help but feel this incredible excitement, like *"Yes! Here we go!"* But setting that aside, Naoto and Raquel are really my favorites.

I don't just like them, I think they're absolutely adorable. Both of them are earnest and straightforward. They tend to act on their emotions without hesitation.

Naoto, in particular, was a character who felt just right to me. I had a strong sense of *"This is how he would act,"* and *"This is something he would say,"* so I could write him easily and naturally. He was a character that really clicked for me.

As for Raquel, she's a character I always want to push to her limits. There's no end to my desire to see what I can make her feel and do. It was so much fun thinking about what she was going through and what she might be feeling.

Let me go ahead and talk about some of the memorable scenes while I'm at it. We still have some pages left, after all.

Well, I'll talk more about the chapter than the scene, actually. The last chapter, Chapter 11, is without a doubt the most important in this novel, and it still weighs heavily on my heart to this day. Of course, the other chapters have left their mark too, but Chapter 11 is particularly heavy, so please don't misunderstand me.

"Bloodedge Experience" is a rare novel for me, as I wrote it from beginning to end, following the chapters in order. So, Chapter 11 was the last chapter I wrote, except for the epilogue. And since it was the final chapter, I was probably really emotionally charged when I wrote it. I was also up against a looming deadline, of course.

I remember being in a highly excited state, leaning forward, pounding away at the keyboard with all my might. By the time I finished writing, I felt like my soul had been drained.

But anyway, let's move on.

"Bloodedge Experience" ends here. To be honest, it feels sad that I have to put a stop to Naoto and Raquel's story. The two volumes were a lot of work, but at the same time, they feel so short. It's over in the blink of an eye. Personally, I can't help but wish I could see even more of Naoto and Raquel in different situations and moments.

Since I just finished writing it, I feel particularly nostalgic. I've written everything I could, but I've grown so attached to the characters across these two books. If I ever get the chance to write another story about Naoto and the others, I would raise my fist in joy. I might even jump up and down in excitement. I'm sure I'd let out some sort of strange happy noise too.

I hope that day will come someday. And I would be incredibly happy if you, the reader, also hope for that.

Now, it looks like the afterword is about to end, and it's already longer than the second epilogue. So here comes the gratitude section!

Since I have the space, I'll be able to say everything I want to say. I hope you'll bear with me for a little while longer. Writing this section always makes me feel like I'm wrapping things up, and it brings a sense of closure to my heart.

First, I want to express my deep gratitude to Mr. Mori, the producer of *BLAZBLUE* and the original creator of *Bloodedge Experience*. Thank you so much for letting me write this novel. It

was a tough yet joyful writing experience. I'm truly grateful to have been entrusted with the characters of Naoto, Raquel, Haruka, Spinner, and so many others. I look forward to working with you again in the future!

To my editor, I apologize for the trouble and the worry I may have caused. Thank you so much for constantly encouraging me. You were the first person to say "It's really interesting!" and that support meant everything to me.

I would also like to thank Kyo, who was responsible for the illustrations. Thank you so much, and great job! Both Mr. Mori and I have worked together on previous projects, but I can only imagine how stressful and challenging it must have been for you to suddenly be thrown into the task of illustrating for this project. I truly appreciate how you brought *Bloodedge Experience* to life with your artwork.

By the way, as I mentioned in the afterword of the first volume, I was the only one among the main team who had not met Kyo in person. Unfortunately, that situation still hasn't changed by the time of this second volume's afterword. I really hope that someday I'll be able to meet you face-to-face and properly thank you in person.

And now, the final part. To you, the reader, thank you for picking up this book and for reading this far. I'm so glad you took the time to explore the story. If you bought this book after reading it, that would be the best outcome I could hope for, but even if you're just reading because you were interested, I'm still very grateful.

The existence of this book is due to the hard work of many people, but for a novel to truly come to life, it requires readers. Because you decided to read *Bloodedge Experience*, it was able to finish its journey as a novel. So, from the bottom of my heart, thank you.

I hope we can meet again someday, on the streets of Shinkawahama. Until then, please don't forget about Naoto and the others!

Mako Komao

こんにちはアークシステムワークスの森です。

本書を手にとって頂いた皆様、本当に有難うございます。

ここであえて言いましょう：

黒鉄ナオトの戦いは「今」開幕しました！！

今後の彼の活躍にご期待下さい。

